

Heritage 2020

Heritage in High Streets: review of existing activity

1 Introduction

1.1 The 2014 *Heritage 2020 Framework* document identified ‘contributing positively to the growth agenda’ and ‘resilience to social and economic forces for change’ as two of the priority areas for collaborative action by the historic environment sector in England under the theme ‘Constructive Conservation and Sustainable Management’.

1.2 The Heritage 2020 Constructive Conservation and Sustainable Management working group identified the following objective as a priority:

Understand the impact of social and economic forces for change on high streets and promote a heritage-led response to addressing the changing face of the high street.

1.3 Associated actions are:

- Map existing activity to fill in gaps in advice and guidance
- Engage with Civic Amenities Act anniversary work for advocacy and public engagement (2017)
- Build partnerships with organisations addressing ‘problem’ buildings (e.g. Community Assets in Difficult Ownership)
- Identify a strategy for engaging with other work/ guidance in the wider commercial world
- Actively link to Heritage Action Zones and Great Place projects
- Build interest in high streets with government and with policy makers.

1.4 The identification of this topic as a priority is a response to considerable recent activity to address a perceived decline in town centres and high streets. The Historic England research report *The Changing Face of the High Street: Decline and Revival* (2013) identifies a combination of social, demographic and technological trends that have created a challenging retail environment which, in turn, has been exacerbated by a prolonged economic downturn. Growth of out-of-town and online retailing has had a particular impact on ‘through the door’ retailing in town centres.

1.5 The report suggests that many town centres are defined by their distinctive historic character which can play a crucial role in creating an attractive setting for retailing and reinforcing competitive advantage, particularly as a ‘destination’ that encompasses more than a retail experience. This, combined with recent changes in national planning policy (the Localism Act of 2011 and the National Planning Policy Framework (2012)), provides opportunities for heritage-led regeneration. Case studies within this report and elsewhere show that such an approach can be successful.

1.6 This document summarises recent activity as a precursor to filling gaps in knowledge about the role that heritage can play in sustaining high streets. It is intended that it will be developed into an online resource that can be added to by anyone with an interest in the topic. It will be complemented by a workshop that brings together active parties to share experience and understanding of the current state of play, and to identify the future challenges and opportunities for heritage-led regeneration and sustainability of high streets.

1.7 Existing activity has been grouped into four categories:

- research and data
- policy
- toolkits
- projects

2 What's already happening?

2.1 Research and data

2.1.1 Historic England [Conservation Areas at Risk database](#)

2.1.2 Historic England [Changing Face of the High Street: decline and revival](#)

2.1.3 Historic England [Regeneration work in Boston, Lincolnshire](#)

2.1.4 [Portas Review](#)

Published in 2011, (after Mary Portas was asked by the Prime Minister to conduct an independent review into the future of high streets), the report focused on what has led to the decline of the high streets and how to create sustainable high streets for the future. It made a series of wide-ranging recommendations (from detailed planning and business rates points to empowering Business Improvement Districts and introducing free parking).

In response, DCLG established 27 Portas Pilots and 333 Town Team Partners to test different approaches to revitalising the high street. After a progress report published in 2013 ([The Future of High Streets](#)), DCLG set up the Future High Streets Forum (FHSF – see 2.2.2 below) to build on the learning from the pilots. FHSF subsequently published a report on progress at four of the pilots, which found that strong local leadership was an important success factor.

2.1.5 [Farrell Review](#)

A National review of architecture and the built environment led by Sir Terry Farrell, commissioned by Ed Vaizey in 2013. A report was published in March 2014 identifying five themes:

- education, outreach and skills
- design quality
- cultural heritage
- economic benefits
- built environment policy.

A key recommendation is that there should be a PLACE review (planning, landscape, architecture, conservation, engineering) of existing places like high streets, mega-hospitals, housing estates and infrastructure projects. The review includes a strand 'Heritage & Future Cities'. A position paper in this strand ([Heritage and Future Cities](#)) was published in September 2014 which suggested 'Place Review Plus Heritage' could become part of a toolkit helping to address broader issues of where growth should go and the protection of heritage assets and settings. A 'Heritage and Future Cities' paper was to provide a framework for follow-up activities. General progress reports were published in August 2014 and January 2015 but the 'Heritage and Future Cities' paper does not appear to have been published.

2.1.6 [Town Centre Investment Management](#) (TCIM)

A framework for how disparate ownership on the high street can be structured. Published in 2016, this summary report sets out an asset management approach that was borne out of a detailed study

funded by DCLG and matched by three pilot councils (Dartford, Melton Mowbray and Weston-super-Mare). It was recognised that fragmented ownership can encourage short-termism, a focus on immediate investment outcomes, and lack joined-up thinking and action. The model recommends a pooling of a critical mass of freeholds in a given area, together with some leasehold and other interests, to form a new investment entity that allows the stock to be adapted, the mix of occupiers to be curated, the investment to be asset managed and the destination to be more effectively marketed. This could either be done voluntarily – by a new investment entity or the council purchasing the assets (not necessarily the businesses) – or, as a last resort, using Compulsory Purchase Orders.

The project is now managed by [Revo](#), the representative body for those in retail property. The three pilot studies proved successful, and while heritage was only really an aspect in one of the local authorities there would be a case for it to be better managed across a larger area if a TCIM approach were adopted.

2.1.7 [Create Streets](#)

Create Streets is a research institute and lobbying organisation which aims to create more and better urban homes. It discourages tower blocks and seeks instead to create straightforward streets of terraced houses and apartments which are financially viable and able to match high-rise densities. It lobbies for reform of the planning system, “to deliver homes that are popular and stand the test of time”, and encourages community-led building and locally-supported estate regeneration. It advises communities and developers, using tools like neighbourhood plans, masterplans, and Community Right to Build, and is now actively seeking sites for development.

Relevance to Heritage 2020: though Create Streets is primarily concerned with new build, it seems keen to work in areas which include both heritage and new build, and is expressly seeking to create the heritage of the future. The founding director Nicholas Boys Smith is a Historic England Commissioner (for further info see his article [‘How we ban the creation of more of the most loved bits of London’](#)).

2.1.8 [Culture and Poverty](#): Harnessing the power of the arts, culture and heritage to promote social justice in Wales.

Commissioned by the Welsh Government in 2013 from Baroness Kay Andrews OBE to recommend ways in which cultural and heritage bodies can work more closely together to broaden access to, appreciation of and participation in, culture in ways that contribute to reducing poverty (<http://gov.wales/docs/drah/publications/140313-culture-and-poverty-en.pdf>). The report sets out the case for access to culture and heritage as a social justice issue and explores the physical and psychological barriers to access. Particular themes relevant to high streets include the importance of the 'local' (anchoring cultural activity in the community), the opportunities for repair/reuse of historic buildings, the importance of funders and agencies working together, and using physical heritage to develop skills. The report is illustrated by many case studies of good practice.

2.1.9 [Townscape Heritage Initiative](#) (evaluation report)

Set up in 1997 (and no longer running), this was HLF’s first venture into regeneration funding, offering grants up to £2m. It took an explicitly conservation-led approach and was designed to help areas that had both heritage merit and social and economic need for public investment. Oxford Brookes University began an evaluation of the THI programme in 1998 one year after the programme was set up. The initial research covered a wide mix of 16 towns and cities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. After initial baseline work, schemes were reviewed after five years, and then again after ten years. The ten-year report for this study, written by the Department of Planning at Oxford Brookes University, is available on the HLF website (see link above). The report

looks at changes to the quality of the townscape and perceptions of local people through a household survey, and at the economic impacts of building reuse.

2.1.10 [Homes on our High Streets](#)

The Federation of Master Builders (FMB) published a report in December 2017, entitled 'Homes on our High Streets: How to unlock residential development of our high streets'. It builds upon research carried out by the Living Over The Shop (LOTS) project and assesses the challenges and opportunities associated with the redevelopment of spaces above shops in or around high streets. It uses six case studies to demonstrate the viability of such projects and concludes that the expansion of such initiatives would help to alleviate the nationwide housing crisis and rejuvenate smaller town centres by increasing footfall. It recommends that there cannot be a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to the redevelopments, particularly because of the need to consider the unique heritage and architectural and planning policy frameworks of each building and local economic strength. The FMB is now working to communicate the findings of the report to local authorities across the UK.

2.2 Policy

2.2.1 Living Over The Shop (LOTS)

The LOTS project ran from 1989 to the late 2000s and sought to convert the tens of thousands of upper-floor spaces that lay empty above shops across the UK, but especially outside of London, into residential use, so as to:

- create affordable housing
- improve town centre economies, including creating income for property maintenance
- create life in city/town centres, reducing vandalism and no-go-areas
- meet housing targets, reduce commuting, and pressure to build on green field sites.

The initiative had the potential to give a use to thousands of (often extensive and empty) upper parts of heritage buildings and encourage the maintenance of the whole building, with multiplier effects from boosting the economies of historic areas. However, the project was difficult to get off the ground. There are some successful examples (e.g. Grainger Trust in Newcastle) of the work of LOTS, but there were multiple ownership and property-investment-model barriers, (some of which were listed on the LOTS website (no longer active)). Experience generated as a result of the project has been incorporated into a new report on the potential for new homes above high street shops by the Federation of Master Builders (see 2.1.10 above).

2.2.2 [Future High Streets Forum](#)

Set up in 2013 by DCLG after the Portas Review (see above), FHSF is led by an executive board which brings together leaders across retail, property and business to better understand the competition our high streets and town centres across the country face. It provides joint business and government leadership to better enable our high streets and town centres to adapt and compete in the face of changing consumer and social trends, and advises the government in the formation and delivery of policies to support high streets and town centres in the short and longer term. The British Property Federation sits on the Forum so there may be an opportunity to form links with Heritage 2020 if appropriate.

2.3 Toolkits (including guidance)

2.3.1 Historic England [Valuing Places: Good Practice in Conservation Areas](#)

2.3.2 Historic England [Local Authority Guidance on Conservation Area Management](#)

2.3.3 Historic England [What You Can Do To Improve Our Streets](#)

2.3.4 [Commonplace tool](#)

An online consultation platform aimed at developers, councils, city managers, consultants, architects and communities, that aims to give the quality and depth of engagement needed to increase reach, trust and buy-in from local communities. Examples of use include the creation of neighbourhood plans. The website includes case studies.

2.3.5 [Better Block project](#)

Better Block Foundation is a US-based non-profit that educates, equips, and empowers communities and their leaders to reshape and reactivate built environments to promote the growth of healthy and vibrant neighbourhoods.

Better Block focuses on six major activities:

- Develop open-source media to help cities, community groups, and emerging leaders create rapid prototyping in the service of creative place-making and support of public life.
- Create opportunities for communities and their existing and emerging leaders to gain exposure to and training from urban planning experts, civic innovators and architects from around the world through global symposiums.
- Facilitate community engagement through input and information, employing charrettes, neighbourhood meeting and workshops with residents, stakeholders and governments about the value of rapid prototyping to enhance public life.
- Host and organize study tours to benchmark successful examples of sustainable initiatives around the world.
- Create new and improve existing modelling tools through experimentation with innovative technologies and scientific solutions.
- Create mentorship programs for emerging leaders and young urbanists.

2.3.6 [Great British High Street](#): a not for profit, Government-funded initiative that promotes and encourages regeneration on high streets. It provides action packs, guidance, reports, and toolkits to help community groups and councillors achieve this, and its flagship awards recognise outstanding high streets for innovative work on a number of categories: city location, market town, village, etc. It also asks businesses to sign the 'High Street Pledge' committing to work together and increase jobs and growth. Government has ploughed a lot of resource into the initiative and it's led by the Cities and Local Growth Team which sits between DCLG and BEIS. It's ongoing, and is part of Government policy to promote high streets.

2.3.7 [Place Alliance](#)

Place Alliance is a movement for place quality that emerged following the Farrell Review. It is an independent not-for-profit. It is founded on the idea that through collaboration and better communication we can establish a culture whereby the quality of place becomes an everyday national and local priority. Place Alliance is open to all and brings together organisations and individuals who share the belief that the quality of our built environment has a profound influence on people's lives. It has a national network of universities and regional groups, working groups around particular topics, and bi-annual national conferences: BigMeet8 is being held in April 2018 and focuses on Artists and the Arts in Place Making.

2.3.8 [Oxford Heritage Plan](#) and [Character Assessment Toolkit](#):

Examples of interventions through policy, especially Local Plans and Neighbourhood Plans.

2.3.9 [Revitalising town centres: a handbook for council leadership](#)

The Local Government Association (LGA) in collaboration with the People & Places Partnership have made available a handbook and accompanying online toolkit to advise council leaders on best practise when approaching the revitalisation of town and city centres. The resources are informed by discussion at the LGA led seminar of senior practitioners in November 2017 and outline the need for adaptable yet sophisticated and sustained solutions that can meet long-term challenges. They suggest projects should generate collaboration between different sectors to address the multitude of factors affecting high streets and town centres. Heritage, in particular, is singled out as one of the essential considerations that creative councils must embrace if they are to help town cities and high streets adapt to unprecedented change by rebalancing their purposes and drawing people to town centres for new reasons. Case studies are used to demonstrate the factors that comprise a successful regeneration project.

2.4 Projects

2.4.1 [The Meanwhile Foundation](#)

Set up in 2012 by Brent Council and Locality to grow the use of vacant property for projects that deliver economic development and social or environmentally led regeneration in areas of social and economic disadvantage. Vacant property represents a cost to landlords and developers and can diminish the vitality of neighbourhoods. The Meanwhile Foundation works in partnership to capture the costs and turn them into opportunities to create social and economic value. It does this by becoming the tenants of vacant properties and enabling people to make valuable use of them in a way that supports their neighbourhoods. It's charitable status means that in theory it can be more affordable for the Foundation to occupy a space than for it to sit empty (by reducing business rates liability by 50%). The Foundation seeks to work with landlords and developers, local authorities (£10,000 buys annual membership to the Foundation, which allows support for any project that meets the Foundation's charitable objectives), and projects and agencies. The Foundation's charitable objectives are the promotion for the public benefit of urban or rural regeneration in areas of social and economic deprivation. The Foundation's work has hitherto been confined to a few London Boroughs (Lambeth, Harrow and Brent).

2.4.2 [Academy of Urbanism](#)

The Academy of Urbanism is a politically independent, not-for-profit organisation that brings together both the current and next generation of urban leaders, thinkers and practitioners. It is built on the knowledge, experience and expertise of over 500 academicians from across the public, private and third sectors. The membership is drawn from a wide range of backgrounds, embracing planning and design, community and cultural development, engineering and property, policy and politics, academia, media and the arts.

Academicians are nominated by their peers and selected on the basis of their contribution to the making and shaping of places through a variety of professional and personal means.

The Academy's mission is to recognise, encourage and celebrate great places across the UK, Europe and beyond, and the people and organisations that create and sustain them. It works with places to identify and reinforce their strengths, and help them recognise and overcome obstacles to greater success.

It provides 'diagnostic' visits, runs a graduate development programme, and holds urban laboratories to encourage partnerships across towns/cities between citizens, civic authorities, private practice and academic institutions.

The focus is on community engagement with the urban environment (and its design/development): there is little that is immediately specific to heritage / high streets.

2.4.3 [Age Concern and Havens Department Store](#)

In 2017, the Architectural Heritage Fund made available seven new grant offers amounting to £32,480 for community-led efforts to save historic buildings in England. Benefitting from this new funding is an initiative by Age Concern Southend-on-Sea (ACSOS) to convert the Art Deco Havens department store in Southend into a community hub for older people. Havens was a family company founded in 1935 but announced that its retail business would close in 2018. Its Art Deco building has many unique features including, original Burmantoft's Faience cladding, 1970s display windows and backlit signage. The ACSOS proposal promises to retain these original features whilst transforming the building into a centre for ACSOS work and as a letting space for the use of other non-profit organisations. The AHF funding, amounting to £4.980, will be used to produce a project viability report for the initiative and help with research into capital funding opportunities. As of July 2018, the relevant planning permission for the change of the use of the building from a retailing space to a community hub has been granted.

Heritage 2020 Constructive Conservation & Sustainable Management group
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