



Aims:

The film aims to:

- i. Demonstrate potential social impacts caused by the “death of the high street”
- ii. Challenge this fatal perception with an alternative type of fulfilment for the character in the narrative.

The workbook aims to:

- i. Explore what the high street is and who it is for.
- ii. Identify some key causes that have led to the concept of the “death of the high street’
- iii. Critically review whether the high street is indeed dead or in fact in a state of transition.

Context

Developments in technology and consequent shifts in shopping behaviours have led to the demise of the high street.

Issue

While media has branded this shift as the “death of the high street”, it has become clear that these spaces are in fact, evolving instead of dying.

Opportunities for further enquiry

In response to this, the following areas present opportunities for further research and development;

- i. Speculate on the way developments in technology could be introduced back into the high street.
- ii. Identify opportunities for marginalised demographics to re engage in the high street as a public realm.
- iii. Investigate how local people have been involved in deciding the future of their high street and how they can help to shape it

THE DEATH OF THE HIGH STREET





Noun

1. British
the main street of a town, usually where the principal shops are situated
2. the market constituted by the general public
3. (modifier)
geared to meet the requirements of, and readily available for
purchase by, the general public
High-Street fashion

(Collins English Dictionary, 2019)

What does the typical high street look like?

Figure 1 demonstrates London Road high street as recent as November 2019. The map shows the diversity of services and outlets on offer. Out of the nine different categories, only one has been designated to highlight the locations that provide “goods”. Most media coverage regarding the “death of the high street” refers to “goods” retail. However, only 20 out of 109 fit into that category. This raises questions about whether the whole high street is suffering or if it is just the “goods” retail sector.

The map also highlights the amount of abandoned outlets that currently reside on London Road. Out of 109, 15 are abandoned; equating to just over 10%. One could deduce that this is down to businesses suffering in the current economic climate and forcing to close. This is a fate that has been felt among independent shops and chain retail outlets alike. It is important to recognise that shopping centres also comprise of a collection of shops. If a shop is vacant on the high street, it could mean that they have simply relocated. However, the length of time that shops remain vacant and the slow regeneration in the form of new shops suggest that shops have in fact been forced to close instead of relocate.

This shows that the high street is not as healthy as it could be or at least as what it was originally built to be.

This is something that is experienced all over the country. In fact, in 2018, there were 24,000 empty commercial properties in London alone (Crowley, 2019:16). When referring to a “commercial property” this would include all of the seven categories listed in figure 1. It can be argued that looking at London as an indicator may not be an accurate forecast on a national scale as it is the capital. However, it could also be argued that if even London high streets, one of the most affluent, populated areas of the country are suffering, then this has to be due to something more than reduced footfall and less disposable income. Other factors must be affecting the high street.

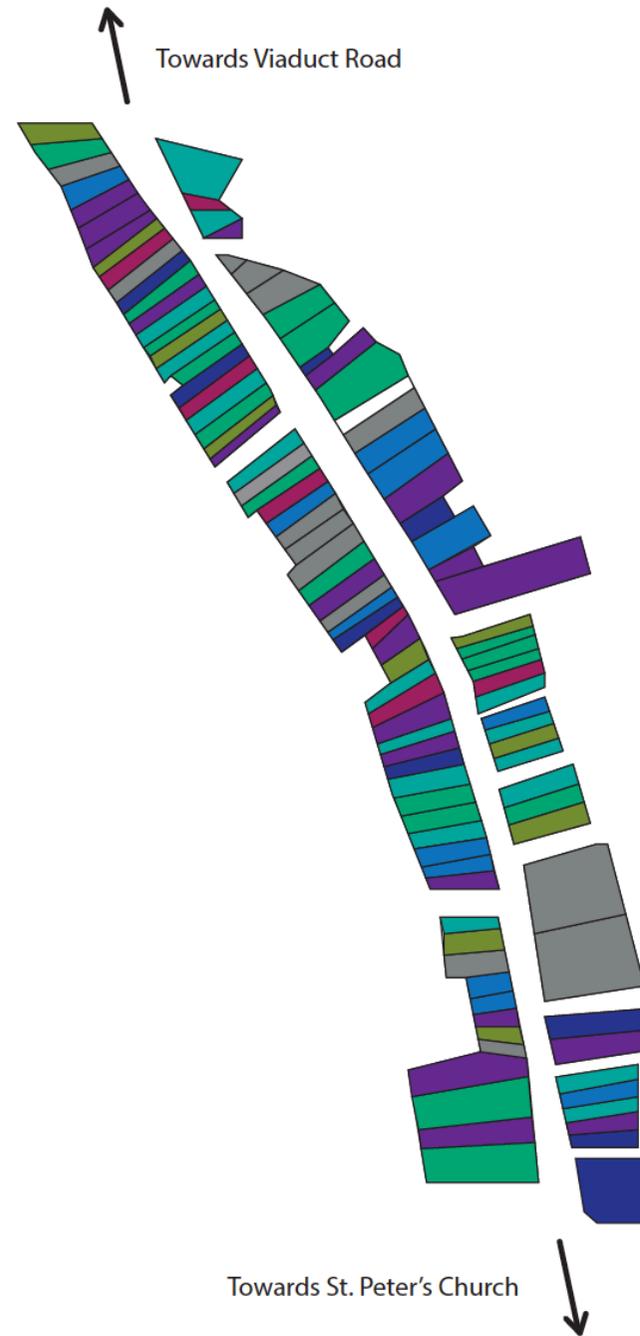


Figure 1: Types of shops along London Road

“By the general public”

Who is the high street for?

Figure 2 demonstrates the range of institutions within a 1km radius and beyond to indicate the type of demographic that would typically access the high street.

First and foremost, the variety of age ranges suggests that the high street would indeed service the “general public”. There are 11 primary schools in the area; followed by 10 local nurseries. This suggests that there are a high number of young families in the surrounding areas. Brighton also has a high student population who may also access the high street.

In this case, the high street is for the general public; a high number of young, economically active individuals. This further strengthens the argument raised previously regarding factors that are affecting the high street. A 1km radius is easily walkable and there are strong bus links that run through London Road too. This means that there is a general public to serve who have a disposable income. They are able to physically reach the high street by walking or public transport. Yet 10% of those shops are abandoned.

A map to show the different institutions by age range in 1km of London Road Shops.

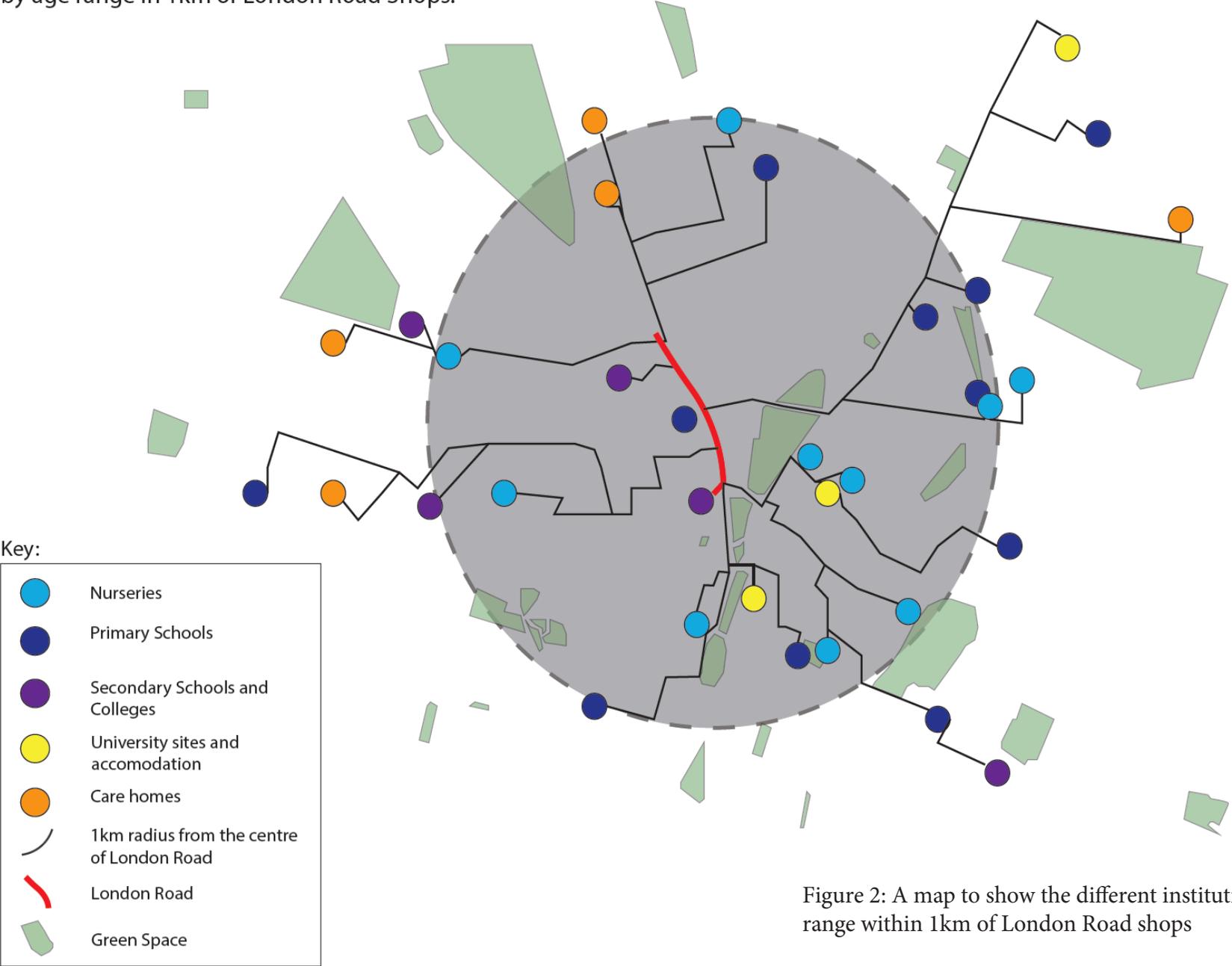


Figure 2: A map to show the different institutions by age range within 1km of London Road shops

“Readily available”

Figure 3 demonstrates when people interact with the high street over a 24 hour period. This data is an artistic representation and is culminated from general observations. It is not based on any particular person's movements.

The first major section is the homeless population. Whilst homeless people might not reside in the same place over the course of a day, they are a constant group represented in that location at any given time. Out of the general public, the homeless population are the demographic that arguably have their needs met the least. Without disposable income, they cannot readily buy things to meet their requirements. Whilst shop fronts might offer some shelter for resting, the high street shops are not “geared” to meet this need; it is an unintentional ulterior use.

The second group of timings consist of working hours. This group includes retail and pub working hours as well as deliveries. In one respect, the high street provides jobs which are required in order to function in a consumerist society. However, this also reflects a large portion of how people interact with the high street without the process of shopping.

The final group show a representation of times when people might actually shop. This group includes errands, commuting time and lunch hours from work although this is not an exhaustive list of when people shop and would not include the weekend. Shops are typically open from 9 to 5 which limits the window of when people can shop. People may buy things out of convenience whilst on their way to somewhere else such as work.

A diagram to show a cross section of uses for a typical high street

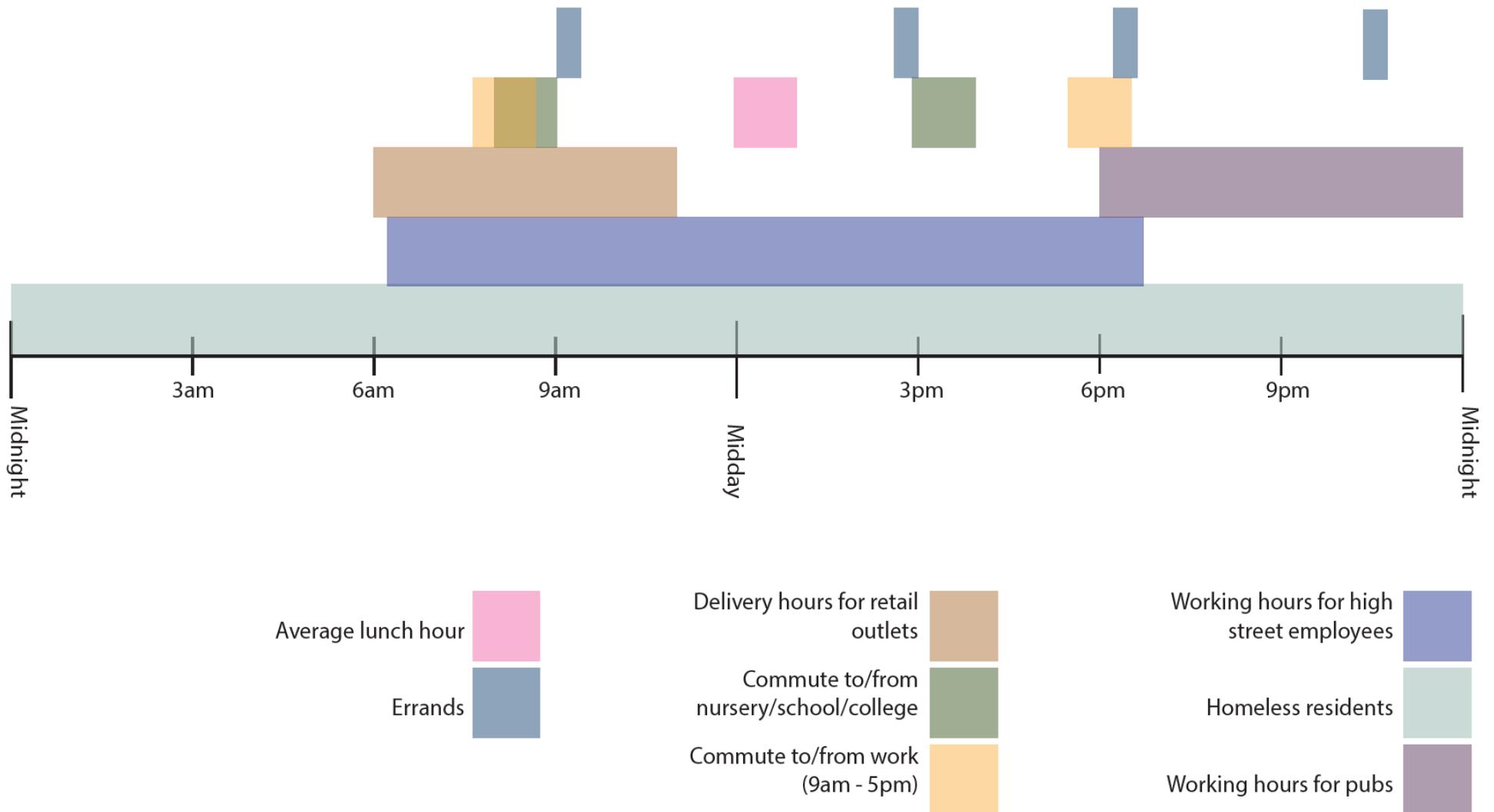


Figure 3: A diagram to show a cross section of uses for the high street over a 24 hour period.

Is the high street itself a public space?

Political theorist Chantal Mouffe asserts that “With the pervasive control of the market, the distinction between public and private space have ceased to be pertinent, since even the public has become privatised” (Mouffe, 2013:85). This is indicative of the fact that even though the high street is “for” the public, it is not in itself a public space. This means that if the high street is not public itself, then there could be private agendas that create friction in developing the high street as a whole.

It has become clear that when defining the high street, it is implicitly referring to a collection of commercial properties that meet the retail needs of the customer. The high street is meant to meet the requirements of the “public” but again, it is implicitly only referring to the economically active. However, the map showing the kinds of people that interact with it as a space show that there is a lot more diversity in both demographic and uses throughout the day.

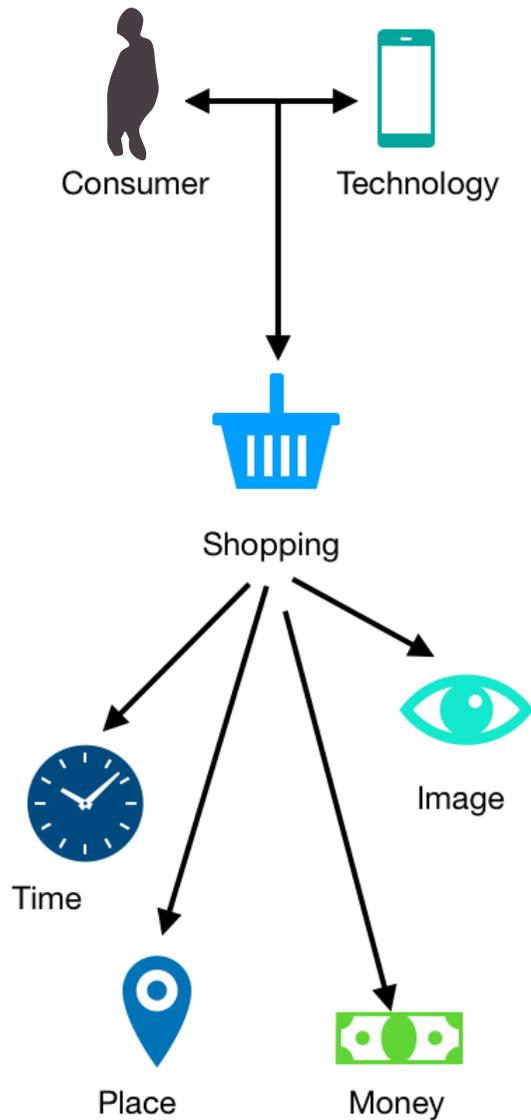
There is clearly a disparity between what a high street should be and how it actually exists. In relation to design, this project would fall under the category of research for design as categorised by Christopher Frayling (1993:1). By exploring the wider context of the high street, it creates a foundation for informed design interventions to emerge.

Why is the high street Suffering?

Exploring
contributing
factors



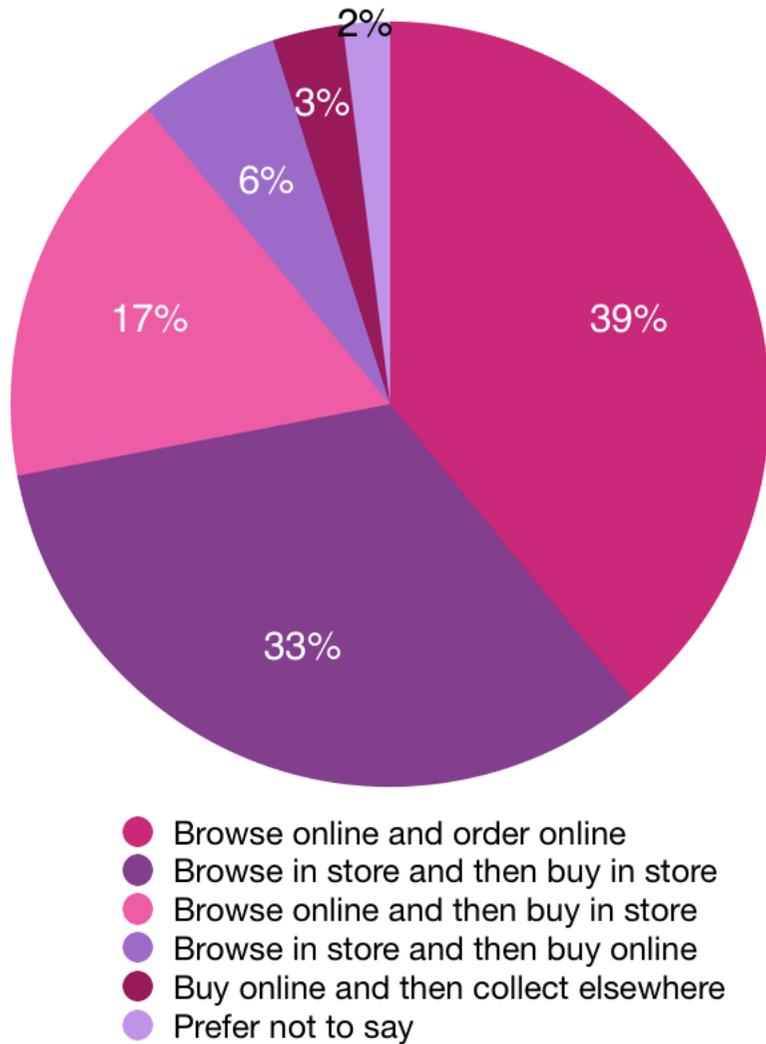
Figure 4: The factors of Online Shopping



In the context of the “death of the high street” it became apparent that the high street only encompassed the businesses that operated at the site instead of the site itself. Furthermore, any reference to the general public actually only specified the economically active; not anybody who interacted with the location. Based on this premise, the following factors are within this predefined remit.

In an Admap article from 2014, Shields writes “transactional retail is shifting online and challenging the role of physical retail” (2014:32). People are no longer buying from the high street but they are consuming through internet shopping instead. Figure 4 shows the relationship between the consumer and technology and the consequent affects that maintain the shift in shopping behaviour. These affects are in part, due to the nature of internet shopping. However, wider societal behaviours coupled with this are what is causing the high street to suffer and bring its future into question.

Figure 5: Simpson, K. Distribution of Preferences amongst Young People, "Life Through A Lens". Pie Chart. The Planner, November, 2019. p.25.



Time:

Internet shopping can be conducted at any time of day. It does not operate within the nine to five opening hours of physical shops. This is advantageous as it means that the consumer does not have to rely on waiting for a shop to open. According to one study, 75% of people shop online in the evening which is when most shops would be closed (Dawson, 2019). It would also not be feasible for shops to stock every single item. Online shopping save titrtrying to track down a particular product as they are more readily available. Some people still prefer to compare items online but buy in store. Figure 5 shows the distribution of preferences among young people.

Place:

Closely linked to the benefits of saving time, internet shopping can be conducted anywhere with an internet connection. Statistics show that the majority of people shop online whilst at home but 42% shop online whilst travelling either to work or the shops (Dawson, 2019). This eliminates the need to visit a physical shop all together.

Money:

The processing of payments online has meant that it is easier to spend money. The British Retail Consortium found that 2017 was the first year that card payments overtook cash payments (British Retail Consortium, 2016). This was in part due to the rise of internet shopping. A report by Project Imagine found that this method of payment was skewing people's perception of spending money. "Handing over cash forces you to see how much you're spending. It's tangible, visible and undeniable." (Project Imagine, 2020) Whilst contactless payment is on the rise in physical shops, not all independent shops accept card payments at all. This ease and disconnect from spending money could contribute to the decline of the high street as money is easier spent elsewhere.

Image:

A wider societal shift that has indirectly impacted upon the high street is the way that people see themselves and the image that they portray to others. When discussing the “triumphs” of late capitalism, Mouffe describes the effect as the “creation of an hedonistic culture” (2013:86). But the desire to keep up an appearance that founded the concept of shopping in the first place has grown beyond the need of physical shops. In fact, it has surpassed its immediate demand that was met by internet shopping.

The desire for image cultivation has now reached the point where physical clothes objects do not even need to be bought. In 2019, the fashion brand Carling launched a collection where customers could pay for an outfit to be “edited onto a photo of themselves, which [sold] out in a week” (Maxwell, 2019:17) Whilst this is a relatively new concept, it could pose further complications for high streets in the future.

Another example of the desire for image cultivation is the customisation of avatars in games. The game Fortnite grossed “\$2.4 billion in 2018” (Maxwell, 2019:17) and according to research by LendEDU, nearly 50% of that expenditure was generated by “in game outfits.” (Maxwell, 2019:18) This further compounds the questionable future of the high street with people cultivating their image without buying anything physical.

It would seem that through an economic lens, the high street as we know it could become obsolete. Although, there are some issues with online shopping and our relationship with technology in general. The following text reflects on both the consumer and technology and where some potential short comings may lay.

Consumer:

The consumer in regards to the physical retail is a person who can first actually reach the high street in the first place. Internet shopping is far more accessible as it can be completed anywhere.

This would be an example of how boundaries are broken to suit the consumer. However, according critical theorist Bernard Harcourt, many more boundaries are being broken that are actually “disempowering individuals” (2015:187-194). He writes “in our digital age, social media companies engage in surveillance, data brokers sell personal information, tech companies govern expression of political views, and intelligence agencies free ride off e-commerce” (2015: 187:194)

It was highlighted in the previous chapter about private agendas in a space for the public. This description could also be applied to the internet; like a virtual high street. In the image factor, it was clear how important the portrayal of an image on social media was. But Harcourt recognises that the agenda of social media is unlike the agenda of a high street shop. Social media for example could also be collecting personal data.

Technology

In a recent survey by the Office for National Statistics, research showed that 100% of 16 to 24 year olds interviewed had “access to the internet on a mobile device” (Prescott, 2019). This means that it would be fair to assume that companies have access to influencing the same amount of young people. One study found that the retail company Target had collected so much data regarding their customer’s consumption, that they were able to “predict pregnancy and other life changing events in order to target coupons and advertising to them” (Duhigg, 2012). Harcourt also discussed company’s access to data. He wrote that corporations could “stimulate our consumption and shape our desires” (2015:194) This kind of influence means that companies likely to encourage shopping through technology over physical retail.

Another issue with technology is access to social media. George Gerbner first put forward the Cultivation Theory. Simply put, people who spend the more time consuming media are more likely to “perceive the real world in ways that reflect the most common and recurrent messages”(Nabi, 2009:69) of the media they are consuming. Although originally based on media as television, there are strong parallels with social media. This poses a threat to the physical existence of the high street as companies target consumers through social media and exploit the cultivation theory.

Can high streets remain relevant now and in the future?

Exploring
existing
successful
models



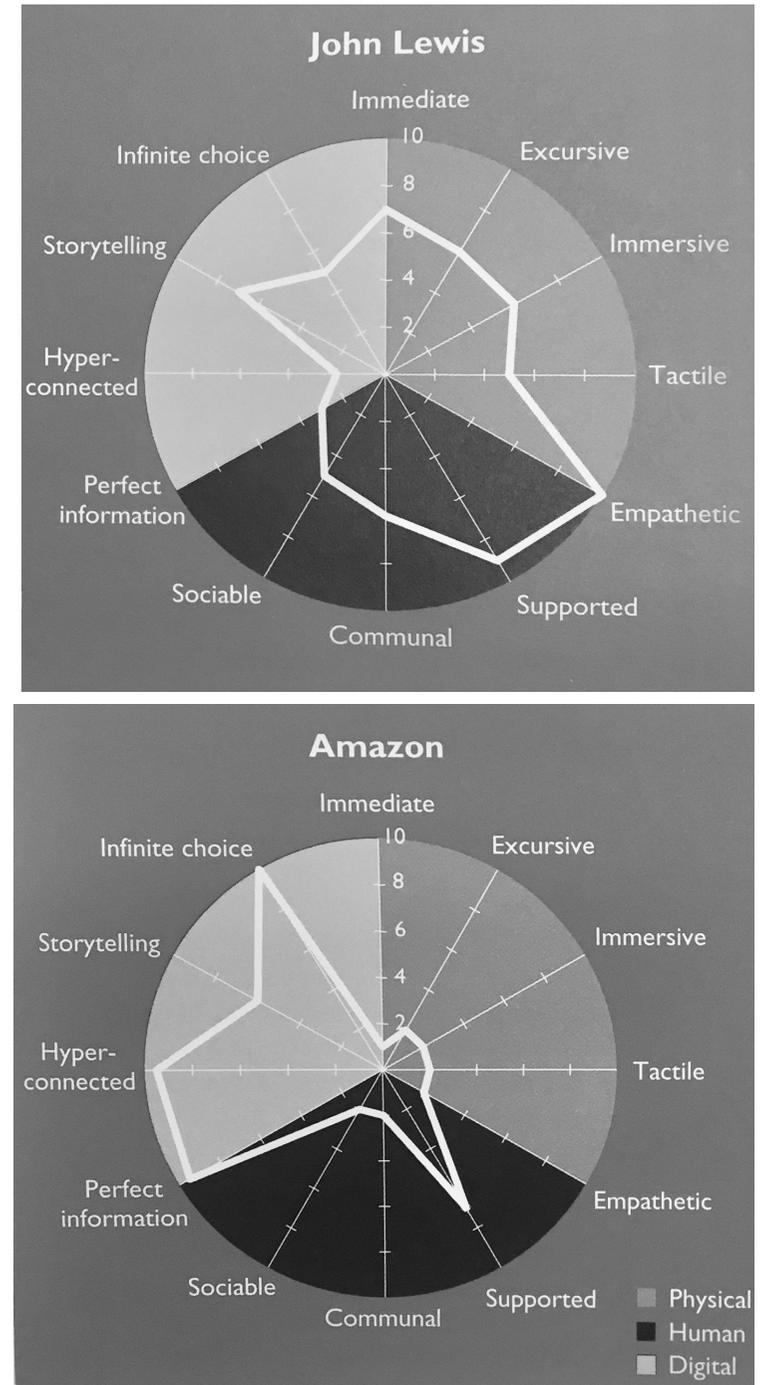
As shown in the last section, online shopping has predominantly affected the way that people shop. This brings into question the future of the high street. The film, along with four case studies will speculate as to what the high street could be defined as in the future.

1) **The high street as we know it will always survive.**

One study conducted by Shields for the magazine Admap suggested that despite all of the benefits of online shopping, there are certain aspects that cannot be imitated. He identified the physical, human and digital elements of a shopper's experience. He then went onto compare online against physical shopping in relation to these elements in the graph below. It showed that whilst Amazon scored highest in "infinite choice", "hyper-connected" and "perfect information", it lacked "social", "empathic" and "story telling" elements among others. (Shields, 2014:25) It could be seen that the areas that physical retail excel in are the more social aspects. These social aspects are what will continue to draw people to the high street. Recognising that these elements need to be cultivated in physical retail present a design opportunity. Possibilities of a design intervention could preserve the existence and purpose of high streets.

*“Each PHD element has natural advantages that are impossible or the others to emulate”
(Shields, 2014:25)*

Figure 6: Shields, A. PHD Elements According to Strategy, “Design the Shopper Experience.” Diagram. Admap, July 2014. p.24.



2) Learning from libraries

This is not the first time the “death” of something has been predicted in the light of advancements in technologies. Libraries suffered a similar scare too. In an article from 2005, Technology Review discussed how libraries would become redundant places. This was in light of Google announcing their plans to scan millions of books to make their contents available when searched for online (Staff, 2005). The article further went on to explain that the fate of libraries would depend on two factors; “the rate at which digitisation and display technologies advance, and the evolution of laws and practices regarding copyrights” (Staff, 2005). This meant that at the time, the concern was not whether libraries would still exist; it was presumed that libraries would definitely become redundant and the only variable was how long it would be before this happened. The article assumed that if people could access these resources at home, then why would anyone actually go out?

Following this prediction, local libraries have suffered and this has led to many closures. In an article for the guardian, John Harris notes that between 2010 and 2017 alone, 478 libraries across England have closed down (Harris, 2017). Like the demise of the high street, the closure of libraries removed an organic space for people to socialise; even if only to sit and read in the company of others. In fact, in an effort to keep libraries open, many local councils resorted to cutting library jobs and closing them on weekends. By dehumanising the library and not having sufficient funds to integrate technology, these survivors of the library cull offered even less social opportunities.

Yet libraries have survived and indeed are beginning to flourish. In an article for Frame magazine, Tracey Ingram writes about how millennials are in fact the catalysts for this. Over “half of 18 to 35 year olds had visited a public library or book mobile in the last year” (Ingram, 2019:133). When searching for parallels in towns that provide free open spaces, they are hard to come by. Ingram suggested that libraries were “beginning to resemble civic squares” (2019:134).

Libraries are an important parallel to draw. It was earlier identified that despite the definition of the high street, the public did not seem to encompass every demographic and seemed that the success of a high street was governed by its economic success. Libraries as a location are designed to cater for the general public; regardless of their disposable income.

When designing the Oodi library in Helsinki, ALA architects ensured that there was more floor space in develop an “indoor extension of public space” (Ingram, 2019:133). The library was completed in 2018 and only a third of the floor space is actually dedicated to books (Gonzalez, 2018). The space has a cinema, recording studios, a maker space, and areas for hosting exhibitions and events (Gonzalez, 2018). It also sits opposite Eduskuntatalo, A Finnish parliament building.. The location represents the important relationship between government and its citizens (Griffiths, 2019). The Oodi library is a poignant example of the public’s needs set as a priority.



Uusheimo, T. 2018. “Oodi Helsinki Central Library / ALA Architects”. Image. https://www.archdaily.com/907675/oodi-helsinki-central-library-ala-architects/5c339cd208a5e5ecd50000b1-oodi-helsinki-central-library-ala-architects-photo?next_project=no

3) Dugnad

Dugnad is a Norwegian term that roughly translates to a community day that occurs a couple of times a year. It originated in the 11th century (Maclure, 2019:17) and not only acts as a pragmatic event, but also unites the community itself in managing local issues. This could be coming together to tidy a shared garden or organising a sports day at school. It is all dependent on what is deemed important to that community at the time and is all inclusive. This in turn, “motivates collective work and feelings of belonging”. Similar to the Oodi library in Finland, it represents a “civil commitment” (Maclure, 2019:17).

This attitude towards shared spaces could be transferrable to the future of the high street. With private shops and private agendas, if a shop closes down, then that company stops being responsible or part of the high street. This type of empathetic politics (Maclure, 2019:17) prioritises social interests above economic ones. It would not be dependent on the businesses that simply occupy that space but the people themselves to be continually committed. The day of Dugnad could also stimulate social interactions away from consumerism.

The day of Dugnad usually happens around the changing of the seasons to prepare for either summer or winter (Simeou, 2015). This could be similar to the changing needs of the high street; whether it still be seasonal changes in the literal sense or more abstracted to encompass wider society shifts.

One example could be meanwhile uses for abandoned shops. There are currently active meanwhile uses in London” (Crowley, 2019:16). This could empower people who have previously been disenfranchised and unable to start a business due to the economic climate affecting the high street.

4) Altrincham High Street

Altrincham high street is a notable case study of how a place capitalised on nurturing the aforementioned PHD elements. Altrincham is a small town outside Manchester in the north west of England. According to a BBC report, “the town had one of the worst shop vacancy rates in the country in 2010” (Hewson, 2018). Around one third of the shops were abandoned. However, in 2018, Altrincham went on to win “the best high street in England” (Thomas, 2018). In part, its success was attributed to the revitalised town market. It had moved away from the struggling facade of a typical market and embraced the image of a local food venue. When comparing this against the physical, human and digital elements (PHD), an array of local produce would score high in communal, tactile and immersive elements.

The high street has also benefitted from larger companies leaving the town centre. It is because it gives independent shops a chance with less competition. The increase in local businesses also brings a level of civic commitment as identified in the library case study. It is a high street that is run for local people by local people.



Vantage Point, No date, “Altrincham after its award winning re-vamp”. image. <https://www.retail-week.com/property/from-ghost-town-to-high-street-of-the-year/7031008.article?authent=1>

Exploring the role of adversarial design



Recognising Tensions

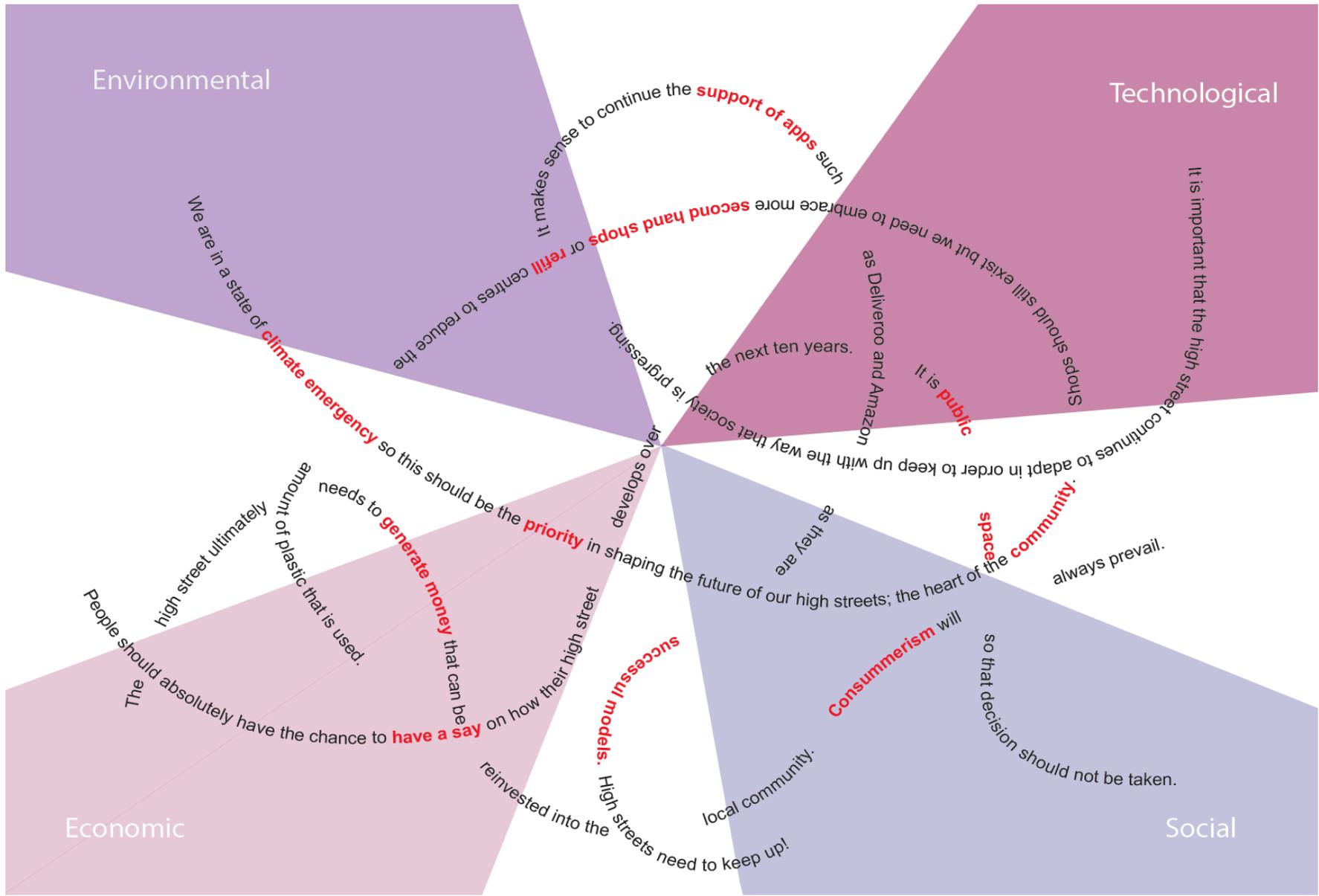


Figure 9: A diagram to illustrate the different tensions between factors

Adversarial Design:

Adversarial Design is a concept that was created by Carl DiSalvo. To begin with, he describes adversarial design as a “kind of inquiry into political conditions” (2015:116). He then goes on to define this type of inquiry as a “process of skilled examination and reconstruction that renders problematic situations sense-able”. This definition can be applicable to this project. This workbook is a type of inquiry into the death of the high street; examining the contributing factors and barriers. The “reconstruction” would follow this research and would be informed by the content of this workbook.

Adversarial design originated from agonisms in political theory. Agonisms exist in democratic societies as conflicting interests; competing to form the “hegemonic practice”. In other words, it is a necessary conflict between ideas in order for a democracy to exist in the first place. Mouffe argues that in regards to hegemonic practices, “every order is the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices. things could always be otherwise and every order is predicted on the exclusion of there possibilities” (Mouffe, 2013:7) It is important to also recognise these conflicts as healthy and should always be a struggle between adversaries or an agonism instead of a struggle between enemies or an antagonism. Mouffe continues:

“Adversaries fight against each other because they want their interpretation of the principles to become hegemonic, but do not put into question the legitimacy of their opponent’s right to fight for the victory of their position.” (2013:10)

This is relevant as adversaries can be identified throughout this project. This has been demonstrated as a visual representation in figure 9. It is important to recognise that these different priorities should and will continue to exist. Any solution listed in the previous section is not a stand alone solution. Civic commitment was highlighted as an area that could be nurtured within the high street. Yet, according to Mouffe, too much consensus could lead to “apathy” and a “disaffection with participation”. They each represent strong points to be considered. On the contrary, simply wiping out technology and online shopping would not solve anything. If anything it could leave people in a worse position. Despite the use of technology being a cause of the high street’s decline, it is not the antagonist.

As stated by DiSalvo, adversarial design “does the work of an agonism” because they “function as contestational objects that challenge and offer alternatives to dominant practices and agendas” (DiSalvo, 2015:115). An example of this would be a design intervention by Alfredo Jaar. In 2000, he was commissioned to create a piece for Skoghall in Sweden (Jacob, and Princenthal, 2005:15). His first suggestion of a cultural centre was “met with resistance” (2005:16). He then inquired into the social climate of the area and ascertained that the paper mill was the main employer in the area so chose to seek funding from them. His examination led to realising the importance of the paper industry to the local area so constructed an exhibition hall made entirely of materials sourced from this mill. However, Jaar’s attitude towards projects was “not to impose his own vision” (2005:16). Therefore, after a day of the exhibition hall being opened, he invited the town to watch it burn to the ground. This was in an effort for the local people to realise the value of having a cultural centre without imposing his belief that it would be best for the town. He approached the resistance or struggle as an adversary instead of an antagonist. The act of burning the paper exhibition hall to the ground was a reconstruction of a problematic situation into something that was sense-able or able to be experienced by the locals.

When discussing a model for better engagement in planning, Stuart McClure expressed the notion of “disputing the idea that economic growth, rather than environmental or social improvement, should be the most desirable output of change” (Maclure 2019:17). This kind of disruption in order to ensure the future of the high street could be best explored through the lens of adversarial design.

Conclusion

To conclude, the high street is seeing a large number of shop closures. This is due to the fact that online shopping suits the needs of our current society. Internet shopping and more broadly, technology, do present some problematic behaviours such as data collection to stimulate more purchases and warping people's perception of money. Libraries faced a similar prognosis but are currently transitioning into potentially pillars of the community again which suggests a similar transition for high streets could be possible. A general improvement in civic responsibility could prevent high streets, as places for the public, from falling into disrepair. These are not entirely solutions. Neither is removing technology and all of the progress it has generated with it. Adversarial design could offer an approach to apply following on from this workbook to make changes that acknowledge that each agenda is valid. This acceptance of tensions could ensure the survival of high streets, whatever form they present in the future.

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