

PRESS RELEASE

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High Street “far from dead” but needs bespoke approach

Town centres and high streets must evolve to thrive, and each – particularly in fast-changing London – needs a bespoke approach, based on who uses the place now and in future. That, along with maintaining authenticity and partnering more effectively, was one of the common themes running through Future of London’s 23rd June conference, ‘Creating Resilient Town Centres’.

The free event hosted some 200 cross-sector practitioners in planning, economic development, regeneration and town centre management. “As we grow, London is having to ask a lot more of its town centres in terms of housing, competition with workspace and community uses, and managing congestion,” said Future of London director Lisa Taylor. “We wanted to share best practice with the people who deliver these places – but we also wanted to check in on some of the myths about dying or dysfunctional high streets. What we found today wasn’t all rosy, but there is room for optimism.”

“The high street is far from dead,” agreed speaker Gerry Hughes, Senior Director and National Head of Planning, Development and Regeneration at Bilfinger GVA. “Indeed there is clear evidence that it is bouncing back, post-recession. This is because we have a natural affinity for our high streets, beyond their function as shopping destinations. They play a key role in social cohesion, sense of belonging and community well-being.”

Speaker Jerome Frost, Arup Global Planning Director and UKMEA Leader of Consulting, sees this trend from both a macro and micro perspective: “With London at the forefront of the global trend in repopulating the inner city, town centres have a renewed importance in providing the ‘living room’ for new and existing communities.

“The ‘Millennial’ generation in particular want to work, sleep and play in inner urban environments, and have more time to do so with day-to-day admin and shopping taken care of via the internet. Our most successful town centres are already accommodating their demands.”

Andrew Beharrell, Senior Partner at Pollard Thomas Edwards architects, brought the example of Hackney Wick to the event. A historically industrial area, Hackney Wick and Fish Island will become mixed-use areas that will include much-needed housing, but which must also include workspace, plus a strong sense of history and integrated or “seeded” community and cultural uses, according to Esther Everett of London Legacy Development Corporation, the planning authority there.

Beharrell, whose firm will develop one of the schemes, reminded the audience that combining live-work-play is nothing new, especially for the Capital: “A common theme of the conference was our yearning for a public centre to our working and domestic lives,” he said. “Hence the ubiquity of coffee shops – where 18th century Londoners conducted their business, of course – and the irony of Facebook creating a simulated student cafe in its corporate HQ.”

'ABCs' – Authentic, Balanced, Connected

Authenticity – mainly safeguarding what works for residents and suits the area culturally and socio-economically – was a recurring theme. In terms of how the largely local-authority audience could deliver that, various speakers highlighted the importance of combining control over core issues like licensing, safety, access and design quality with a degree of “letting go”: welcoming informality, spontaneity and self-organisation.

Most acknowledged that with London’s varied neighbourhoods, preserving storefronts and independent businesses can be the response for older, denser areas, while larger, newer places have residents who actively want leisure and food chains they recognise. The key is knowing and serving the people who use them.

Said Hughes: “High streets are already evolving rapidly in response to technological and social change. We need bespoke approaches to address the implications of these changes, taking account of particular local circumstances.”

Speakers and participants also cited the balance to be maintained between supporting growth, increasing density and/or housing numbers and retaining workspace, heritage and diversity. James Murray, Islington Council Executive Member for Housing, warned of the thousands of jobs lost in his borough alone to sometimes poorly designed or uncompleted office-to-residential conversions, among other permitted-development use changes. He pointed out that boroughs do have tools to create the high streets and town centres they want – they just need the political will to use them.

The ‘bespoke’ approach came up again on the question of planning regulation. As Beharrell pointed out: “One thing that’s striking is the proximity of most London homes to existing high streets, and the potential to reinvent town centres as places to live, work and recreate - with buying goods being just one activity among many. Planning use restrictions can be an obstacle to this.”

All agreed that connectivity is crucial to thriving town centres, for accessibility and good urban design. Town centres need clear links – this is a priority for Old Oak & Park Royal, said Victoria Hills, the development corporation’s CEO, where ‘Old Oak High Street’ will be built to connect existing and new centres.

Further, assessing shopping behaviours associated with movement patterns allows for a better understanding of town centre traffic: as the British Retail Consortium’s Andy Godfrey showed, the presence of well-designed walkways, cycle paths and good public transportation contributes greatly to the £18.5bn that retail tax adds to the economy each year. More than 85% of this contribution still comes from visits to bricks-and-mortar shops, so while the internet has affected behaviour, town centres remain core spaces for shopping.

There are challenges, however. Sue Foster, Lambeth Council’s Strategic Director for Delivery, pointed out during her talk on navigating the challenges of Brixton town centre that the night tube could have a serious impact on congestion, safety and the night-time economy. This was a concern for others as well, and it’s clear that the new service will have to be rolled out carefully.

But there's no money

Clearly, good urban design and responsive town centre planning and management cost money, and there is less and less of that at the local authority level, where the lion's share of responsibility sits.

However, there were glimmers of hope, in a new round of regeneration funding from the Greater London Authority, and in the potential for more effective partnering with community and private partners and Business Improvement Districts. Camden Town Unlimited BID CEO Simon Pitkeathley sees these membership groups as untapped – and potentially abused, in that they don't exist just to provide services local authorities have to cut. A few speakers also cited projects completed with European Union funding, reminding the audience of what might be lost if the UK were to leave.

This Future of London conference, which hosted some 200 planning, regeneration, economic development and town centre management practitioners from across London, was offered free of charge thanks to Arup, Bilfinger GVA and Pollard Thomas Edwards.

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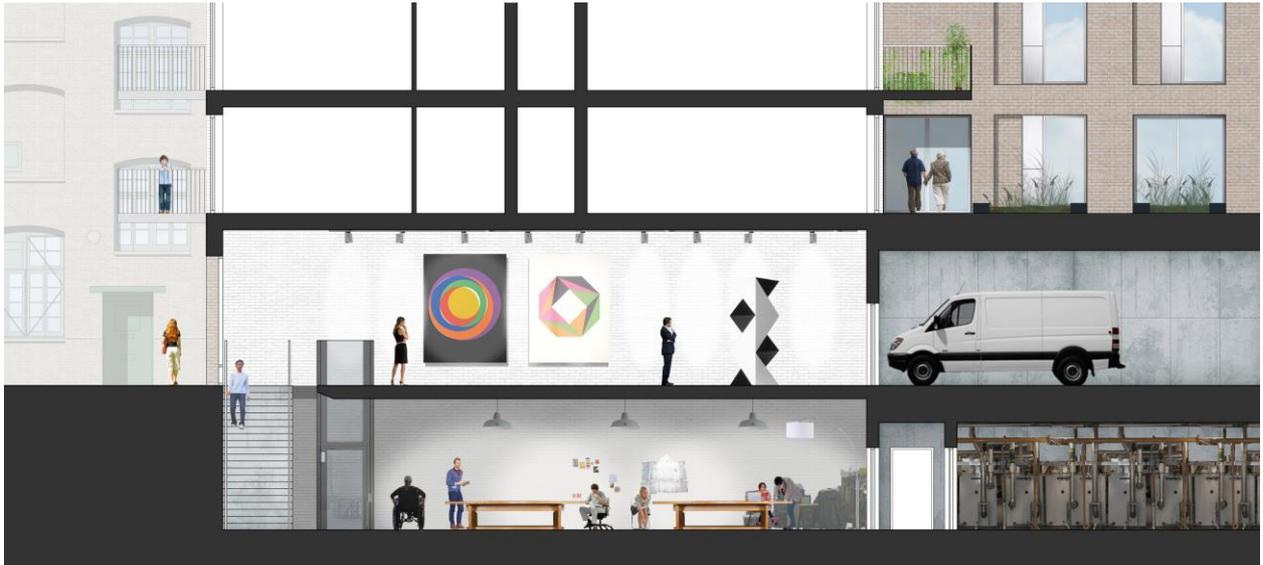
Editor: **Future of London** is an independent not-for-profit policy network focused on the challenges facing regeneration, housing, infrastructure and economic development practitioners in the Capital. FoL is a borough-led membership organisation with a number of external partners, and provides bespoke career development, expert-led research, and issue-focused visits, events and networking.

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Images – see next page; please contact alexei@futureoflondon.org.uk for more/different res.

Images:



Cross-section of planned Hackney Wick mixed-use space, courtesy Pollard Thomas Edwards

All conference photos – Credit: Marcos Bevilacqua Photography, courtesy GVA



Conference keynote: Daniel Moylan



Sue Foster



Andrew Beharrell



Gerry Hughes



Jerome Frost



James Murray



Lucinda Turner



Andy Godfrey