

HOPEFUL TOWNS: 'WHAT WORKS?' (3)

DECLINE NARRATIVES AND THE POWER OF THE PUBLIC REALM

BRIEF

The state of the public realm is inextricably linked with resilience. Everyday problems around living environment can fuel pessimism and increase hostility to change. Often, this gives a foothold to the far right.

This learning note summarises the key lessons from the third in our Hopeful Towns 'What Works' series. Each webinar in the series looks at a different aspect of local policy, to try and understand what works when it comes to building resilience in towns across England and Wales. We heard from five speakers in total at this event. The interventions described spanned large infrastructure projects as well as grass roots initiatives.

CONTEXT

Visible decline of the public realm can describe a number of things. It takes in local issues, like boarded up houses, empty shops or closing pubs, as well challenges like anti-social behaviour and littering. And it relates to other problems too, like traffic, green space and air quality.

Our research generally shows that these types of issue, varied as they are, can all feed into lower resilience. A feeling that the immediate community is in decline reduces trust – in decision-makers and each other – and amplifies suspicion of change and difference.

At this event we explored this. What works when it comes to stimulating pride in the public realm? How can specific approaches – be they grass roots arts projects or strategic initiatives by the local authority – make a difference?

KEY THEMES

A fascinating range of topics came through in the discussions. Six themes in particular were mentioned.

1. SPACES FOR COMMUNITIES TO THRIVE

A landscape of decline poses clear resilience challenges, but can also bring about new opportunities. As Will Brett put it, "There's all this space, but a lot of space that people don't know what to do with." He described how approaches to funding which prioritise getting spaces used can unlock potential.

Many of our speakers talked in similar ways about rethinking the public realm, beyond commercial uses. Empty Shop, for example, have used arts projects to reclaim boarded-up high streets. On a huge scale, meanwhile, Bradford

SPEAKERS

- **LAUREN MILLS**, Education and Outreach Coordinator (The Woodville), Actor/ Facilitator/Theatre Maker (Gravesend Arts Salon)
- **NICK MALYAN**, Director, Empty Shop CIC
- **WILL BRETT**, comms, campaigns and public affairs for Guardians of the Arches
- **GULNAZ HUSSAIN**, Manager, Firvale Community Hub, Sheffield Page Hall
- **TINA PARRY**, Delivery Manager for Economic Development at Bradford Council (with key responsibilities around the Bradford City Park regeneration project)

City Park set out to create a central installation – the mirror pool – which went beyond the traditional town centre function. Its aim was to cultivate local pride, glue the city together and provide a place for people to mix.

2. START BY LOOKING WHAT'S ALREADY THERE

Making the most of the existing landscape was a key theme, and there was a consensus that an asset-based approach is the best place to start. As Nick Malyan put it, “There’s no such thing as a cultural desert – where there are people, there is culture”. Rather than start from scratch, look at the existing environment and its roots in local history and heritage.

Nick described collieries transformed into nature reserves in county Durham, as well as the Church Street project in Hartlepool, where murals drawing on local heritage had sought to recall a proud past. Similarly, projects delivered via the Gravesend Arts Salon and the Woodville Theatre in Gravesend built on existing resources, such as the town’s relationship with the Thames.

3. MAKING LINKS AND CONNECTIONS

Will Brett discussed the nature of railway arches as an unusual type of business space, offering cheap premises and bringing mixed enterprise as well as a strong sense of community. Within this lay wider lessons, about how you can revamp community spaces for which there is little initial demand.

A key element of the Guardians of the Arches story was about forging links. The organisation has set up a network of these types of businesses across the country, connecting them together so as to create more power to speak as one. Likewise, we heard how Empty Shop’s creative projects had made links with national and internationally acclaimed artists, helping to plug communities into wider conversations, and to build confidence among young people.

4. FOCUSING ON PEOPLE

A strong public realm is contingent on strong community relationships. Gulnaz Hussain, from Firvale Community Hub in Sheffield’s Page Hall area, described integrated support for marginalised communities with complex needs. This had linked into wider public realm work – such as backyard clean-up operations – as a means of bringing people together and allowing neighbourhoods to solve their own issues. Likewise, Lauren Mills recounted how a group

of urban knitters had made dramatic visible differences to the town, as a small group working from a market stall.

On a much bigger scale, the Bradford City Park project followed the same model. It built public support through an extensive consultation phase with residents and school children, allowing the community to own the idea.

5. A CULTURE OF POSSIBILITY

Public realm initiatives work best when they feed into wider efforts to unlock the potential of an area. Empty Shop, for instance, works not only to revive high streets but to create new opportunities for young people. Similarly Gravesend’s Woodville Theatre offers apprenticeships for young people.

In the post-pandemic landscape, this could be especially important, as the economic geography of the country changes, and the high street retail sector adapts or shrinks. Will Brett noted, for example, that – while large retail chains had struggled – footfall on town highstreets had actually surged when the first lockdown was lifted, as people looked for local options.

6. PROPERTY REGULATION AND ALTERNATIVE MODELS

One of the major challenges for the public realm lies in property. Gulnaz Hussain told us about public realm issues that have emerged as a result of high population churn in Page Hall, Sheffield. This included run-down HMOs, which often feed into a sense of decline.

However, the session also revealed opportunities here, both to improve regulations and to restructure ownership models. Case studies cited included Nudge Community in Plymouth, as well as examples from Dumfries, where the community is working with the council to buy up empty spaces on the high street.

NEXT SESSION

The next webinar in the WHAT WORKS series is entitled ‘Tackling narratives of scarcity in deprived communities’. It will be held on **April 29th 2021, between 11am and 12.30pm**. Put it in the calendar if you’d be interested, and we will send out the Zoom invite nearer the time.

In the meantime please encourage others who might be interested in the topics discussed to join our Towns Leadership Network: <https://www.hopefultowns.co.uk/network>