

High Streets Task Force Case Study: Norwood High Street

24th November 2020

The Power of Norwood High Street

Historically, Norwood High Street in West Norwood, Lambeth, contained some of the earliest groups of shops in the area but the street has never developed into a major shopping centre. It was built in the period of horse drawn trams that shuttled passengers along the road from the terminus in front of West Norwood Cemetery towards central London. This high street has suffered from post-war depopulation and the fact that it runs through Lambeth's largest industrial estate. At the moment, it suffers from above average vacancy rate and a poor urban environment.

The area includes a mixture of warehouse, retail and wholesale premises, office buildings, railway arches and the newly opened cultural facilities such as the Library and Picturehouse and South London Theatre. There are some shops along the high street, although roughly a third of these retail premises have been converted (probably without the prerequisite planning permissions) for residential use. In total, there are 73 retail premises, of which 23 have been converted to flats and about 10-14 are vacant or used just for storage.

Norwood High Street cuts through a recognised and protected employment area, the West Norwood Key Industrial Business Area (KIBA), which has the largest concentration of employment use in the borough. It includes a range of offices, warehouses, artist studios and small business units, as well as a scrap yard in the east by the railway line and is home to a variety of users including small businesses, retailers and manufacturing companies. There are also a number of vacant sites.

The population in the area is made up of a diverse cross section of society by age, ethnicity and wealth. Over the last decade there has been a continuing influx of young people and couples with small children. There are a number of community groups and organisations actively working to make the area a better place. The most famous of these is West Norwood Feast, a monthly community street market event organised by local volunteers which takes place over four sites; outside St Luke's Church, the leisure centre, the library and along Chatsworth Way.

The area around the northern part of the High Street has been identified by Lambeth Council as having the potential to become South London's Creative Enterprise Zone, a prominent hub for creative industries. This is something that [The Neighbourhood Planning Assembly](#) is pursuing.

The Neighbourhood Planning Assembly has produced [The Norwood Green Town Charter](#) which is the Neighbourhood Plan for Norwood. This is being written by a cohesive committee made up of local community representatives, residents and including a number of built environment professionals.

The Norwood Green Town Charter sets out a shared vision and ambitions for the neighbourhood over the next 10-20 years and proposes a new Creative Enterprise Zone designation in the area. This is to redefine and revitalise the role of Norwood High Street and its surrounds for creative and digital enterprises, building on the proximity to the Commercial Areas, and heritage and cultural sites in the town centre.

There is a shared ambition to grow the area's reputation as an enterprising hub, both for the current industrious community, as well as a welcoming place for future businesses. This hub has a significant impact on the local and regional economy. It is a vibrant and diverse industrial estate, with mechanics, chemical factories, paint and sign makers, cake bakers and coffee grinders all working side by side.

This uniqueness has been enhanced by the project [Norwood Works](#), which is a brand identity project developed by a working group of KIBA business owners, officers from Lambeth council (who provided the funding for the rebranding exercise) and Station to Station, the Business Improvement District for Tulse Hill and West Norwood. The name 'Norwood Works' is intended to unite all businesses and employees in the area under this common aspiration. The aim is to create a sense of place and identity by expanding the scheme around the estate. The new brand name, along with the similarly branded murals and signage throughout the estate, will put Norwood Works firmly on the map as a place of ingenuity, hard work and a place to be proud of.

The Power of Norwood High Street is a case study developed by A Small Studio to convert an abandoned off-license shop into a flexible affordable workspace and simultaneously hold a month-long community consultation about the potential of this declining stretch of high street. This case study has been used as evidence based for the Neighbourhood Plan and as an incubator for local creative economies. Both of these aims are actively testing the resilience of Norwood High Street as a place of reinvention.

The Neighbourhood Plan aims to ensure that West Norwood remains a great place to live, with a prosperous and resilient future. In particular, it wants to make sure that Norwood does all its can to respond to the global impacts of climate change. Its vision and policies are defined to ensure that environmental issues are considered in every aspect of planning, development and regeneration. On Norwood High Street, it aims to bring about a greater intensity of activities and business uses and to open up the area to be more attractive and safer for local people.

The case study for [The Power of Norwood High Street](#) is a collaboration between [A Small Studio](#) and the local BID, [Station to Station](#). As a collective, we want to improve West Norwood, making it a permanent sustainable creative economy. This means tapping into the creativity of residents, professionals and existing

business that make West Norwood the culturally rich and socially diverse neighbourhood it is. We want to promote creative regeneration and placemaking of the neighbourhood whilst mitigating the gentrification witnessed in other London 'successful' areas.

We want to increase local collaborations and collectively strengthen the area's local values. Above all, we want to see Norwood High Street become a genuinely mixed-used creative economy that above all protects its local artists and small business. West Norwood has the potential to be a hyper-local creative economy SME hub of London.

Description of the project/initiative

WHAT

The Power of Norwood High Street was a month-long digital consultation as part of the London Festival of Architecture in June 2020. Working with the local community and in collaboration with Station to Station, A Small Studio, an architecture practice based in West Norwood, proposed a radical re-think of the use of Norwood High Street. This high street is full of potential. It is an area with limited commerce but with a wealth of industry, with artists and makers working around its edges. We believe Norwood High Street and its surrounds can be re-invented as a creative and cultural link between Brixton and Croydon. There are key sites available for affordable housing and developer-led projects, but we want to ensure the street level remains in use by and for the local people. This means affordable workspace, parks, pop-up venues, ecology walks, cafés, innovation hubs. We need to ensure the local businesses, makers, artists, school-children, freelancers, young families, SMEs and senior citizens have a high street that serves their needs.

We capitalised on the digital aspect of being in lockdown and, through a series of online talks and web-based interactive workshops, we worked with different local demographics to get a wider (and more exciting!) series of proposals to revitalise and redefine Norwood High Street. We concentrated on the existing high street buildings (mainly commercial); a future high street square; and the mixed-use fringe (mainly artists & makers workspaces). To ensure the community consultation would promote a citizen-led regeneration we used the Mayor of London's ['High Streets for All'](#) recommendations as a guide.

Public consultation

The British high street has been in gradual decline for the past 20 years. The number of empty shops in 2020 is at a record high of 12% nationally. However, the COVID-19 lockdown might lead to a re-emergence of the high street because during lockdown, residents have turned to their corner shops for their convenience and proximity to home. We think there is untapped potential in Norwood High Street, which is an area with limited commerce but with a wealth of industry, artists and makers working around its edges.



Journey

How do we visit our high street?

Click JOURNEY to see the results from a collaboration with urban ecologist Joanna Ferguson with whom we have developed a Bat's Highway

Activities

How do you use the high street?

Click ACTIVITIES to see the results from our Poll, the Pecha Kucha and the Roundtable with Lambeth Council

Landscape

Identifying new public spaces on the high street

Click LANDSCAPE to see the results from our Workshop for Secondary School Children, the Workshop for Residents with Learning Difficulties and the Landscape Webinar.

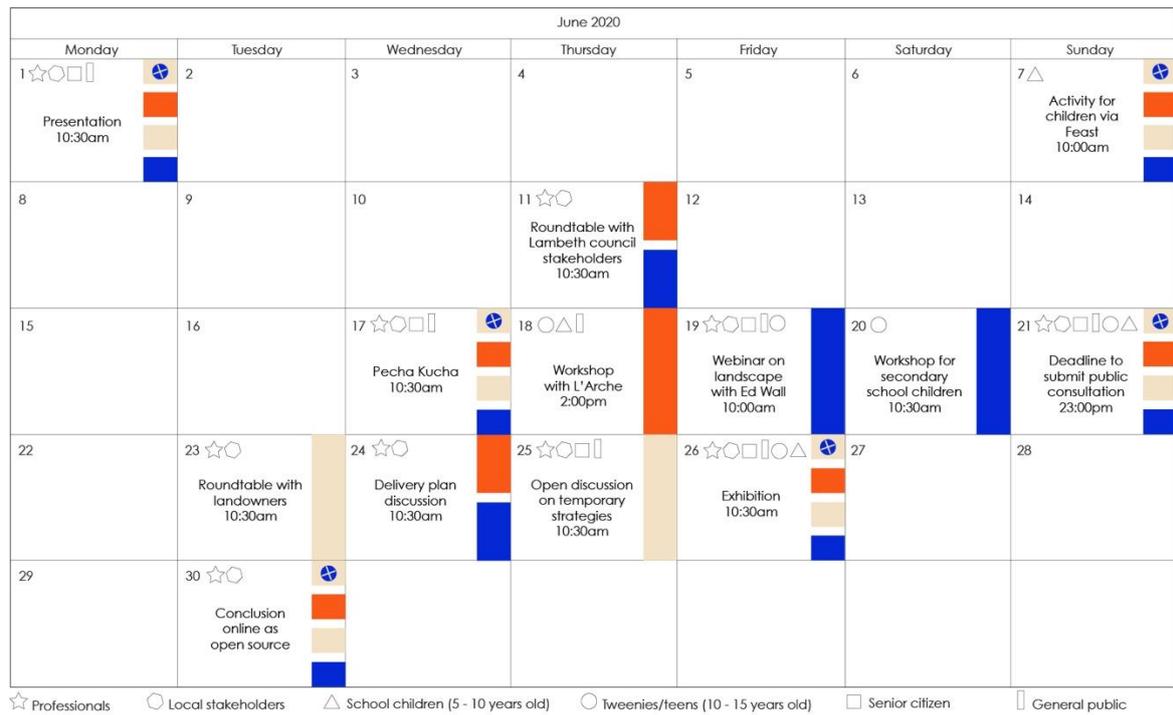
Space

What type of spaces do you want on the high street?

Click SPACE to see the results from our Roundtable with Landowners, Open Discussion about Temporary Strategies, Workshop for Residents with Learning Difficulties and Activity for Children.

We asked the local businesses, residents, shopkeepers, landowners and even children to participate in a wide and diverse number of activities. To ensure that different ages and interest groups could participate we organised children’s workshops, online polls, roundtables, open discussions, teenage 3D ‘real’ designing, seminars and presentations.

The programme culminated in an online exhibition to showcase the community result, which remains as an open source online. These results also informed the ongoing Neighbourhood Plan that is currently being written by a cohesive committee made up of local community representatives, residents and a number of built environment professionals including A Small Studio and Station to Station (BID).



WHY

A Small Studio is a design studio based in London which specialises in architecture, interior design, landscape, planning and research. The Studio has worked in south London for a decade and has always wanted a workspace that was closer to the community and not working in a silo within an office building. We struggled to find anywhere suitable. Finally, in 2019 we made the risky investment of buying an empty, run-down shop that had been vacant for years on this declining high street. We envisaged refurbishing this shop into a creative co-working space, with a community room for workshops and meetings.

Siting our business here would support local retail and services by bringing people into the area during working hours and regenerating a run-down strip of the high street where there is currently little sense of place. The proposal would have improved current facilities by refurbishing and upgrading an empty and abandoned shop and increasing the number of people working in the area who need affordable and flexible working space locally. However, this has been a complicated process: The Local Authority doesn’t

understand the changing needs of retail and continues to be fixated on the Local Plan which insists on a retail frontage along the high street. But times are changing! Retail is in crisis; flexible working is on the rise and consumers want experiences as well as shopping. At A Small Studio we are trying to address this challenge by using our empty shop as a pilot project.

Station to Station, the Tulse Hill & West Norwood Business Improvement District (BID) is dedicated to making the area a great place to work, live and play. The BID is funded by the businesses themselves and is run by a small, local team who support and promote the businesses within it. Its aim is to raise the profile of the area, work to make the public realm the most inviting it can be and encourage residents to shop (and even work!) locally.

The BID is actively involved in this collaboration as A Small Studio's aims are theirs - to push Norwood High Street and its immediate surrounds to reach its full potential as a dynamic, affordable work spacing hub for all of Lambeth. Their aspiration, and Lambeth Council's, is to see this underused and unloved street bought back to life; full of workers from start-up companies and creative industries, sharing workspaces with artists, makers and designers. In a post COVID-19 world, we would like those small businesses that have struggled to cover costs to make this area their new base for flexible and affordable workspace.

WHO

The main aim of this public consultation was to be as inclusive as possible, this can be distilled with the way we have approached our contributors to The Power of Norwood High Street. Involved in the activities we had community groups (Creative Wick, ft'work, Norwood Action Group, Network Norwood, Norwood Forum, Norwood Planning Assembly, Open Orchard), harder-to-reach citizens (West Norwood Feast, L'Arche, The Elmgreen School), local stakeholders (local residents, Norwood High Street landowners, Portico Gallery, Small Medium Enterprises, shopkeepers of Norwood High Street), local practitioners (East Anglia Records, Mark Fairhurst Architects, One Hundred Projects, Prior & Partners, R2 Studio Architects, Untitled Practice), and statutory authorities (Lambeth Councillors, London Borough of Lambeth's Business, Culture and Investment Team, Planning Team, Policy Team and Regeneration Team).

HOW

The consultation was divided in four themes with specific prompt questions:

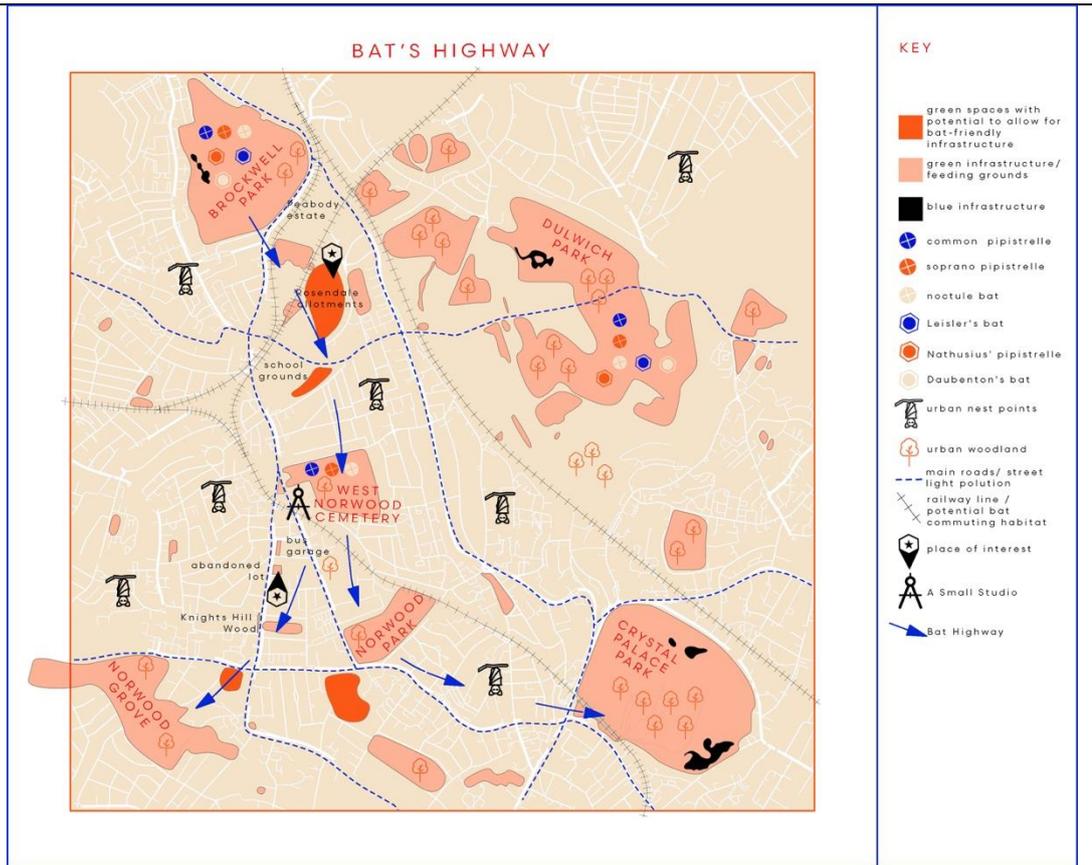
- **Journey:** How do we visit our high street? To understand the types of programmes and functions that we should encourage. How do you use Norwood High Street? What type of route do you take to cross the street, and where are the places you like to linger?
- **Activities:** How do you use the high street? Technically, how does planning in the Local Authority respond to this? For example, do we need new 'Use Classes' to facilitate adaptable strategies? How can we protect unintended activity and the use of interstitial places? Artists and makers have adapted railway arches and abandoned warehouses making a strong artisan community. How can

we ensure any high street 'gentrification' doesn't push them out? How can we provide even more flexible workspace for locals?

- **Landscape:** Identify new public spaces on the high street. Through landscape tactics, how can we adapt a busy carriageway into a place where local people want to walk; where cars drive slowly; where bicycles are championed; and where the pavement is activated? By focusing on these three areas we can test the resilience of the high street by re-imagining how its buildings can change use. What is a public square today? Is it a playground? Is it where young people hang out? Is it a community venue? Is it for relaxation or productivity? Is it an experience?
- **Space:** What type of spaces do you want on the high street? What types of programmes and new functions can we encourage on Norwood High Street that would promote different, relevant, adaptable and flexible new spaces along its length? What can we do about the existing empty high street shops? Is there a use other than commerce? Or do we focus on the street? If we explore landscape tactics to change the street will the buildings and shops naturally follow?

The activities and outcomes where the following:

- **Map your journey:** We asked to map out people's journey in a map provided online. We didn't receive a lot of information about human journeys but we did receive a lot of information about bat journeys. And so the Bat's Highway was born. A collaboration with urban bat ecologist Joanna Ferguson emerged, with whom we have developed a Bat Highway in the area. Also, we created a webpage where the public can find information about facts why bats are important to keep within the neighbourhood; a list of the bat species identified in West Norwood; landscape and urban design guidelines for bats and biodiversity; key principles of lighting design.



- **Roundtable with Lambeth Council:** This was a private event and the aim was to discuss this locality (or 'key site' according to neighbourhood plan) with Planning, Policy, Regeneration and Business & Enterprise teams within Lambeth Council and find a common ground that we can work collectively on. Mainly so that the top-down ambition is synchronised with the bottom-up aspiration that is being prepared as part of the Neighbourhood Plan.
- **Pecha Kucha:** On this event, there were six presentations from invited architects, artists and planners who work locally. Each presented a utopian vision of how Norwood High Street could be regenerated. After the Pecha Kucha we realised the different visions were very synchronised and could be integrated into a single community-driven framework for transformation. This framework addresses not only Norwood High Street but also the Key Industrial Business Area (KIBA) to the west and the existing artist warehouses to the east of the high street. This integrated view of the area is a more realistic boundary-free approach to understanding West Norwood and promoting a comprehensive regeneration. The community-driven framework has been prepared by: A Small Studio, R2 Studio Architects, Untitled Practice, Norwood Planning Assembly, Mark Fairhurst Architects.

West Norwood High Street and Business Area: A community-driven framework for transformation:

- A Green Infrastructure strategy
- The High Street as threshold to the Great North Wood
- A creative business area with affordable workspace
- Meowhile strategies
- A strong public realm
- Protected affordable workspaces for fine artists & makers
- New development opportunities for the creative economy



- **Activities Poll:** We launched a poll with the same questions at every event, including an email circulation to local businesses using Google Forms. In total we had 68 participants.
- **Landscape Webinar:** We invited Ed Wall to talk to us about ‘High Streets, Lowlands’. Ed is the leader of Academic Leader Landscape at the University of Greenwich and Visiting Professor at Politecnico di Milano (DiAP) but more importantly, he is an inspiring voice that will always approach landscape architecture from the most unexpected angle.
- **Workshop for Secondary School Children:** We led a workshop on SketchUp to students from local Elmgreen School to enable them to work on 3D modelling through a free and easy to use the software. They learnt basic model-making and explored ‘blue-sky-thinking’ ideas of what a public space should or could be. Then we asked them to reimagine Knight Hill Square and design their ideal public space.
- **Workshop for Residents with Learning Difficulties:** L’Arche is a registered charity that offers high quality, person-centred support for adults with learning disabilities. Reflecting the diversity, uniqueness and differing needs of each person, some individuals are supported in their own homes for a few hours per week, while others are supported twenty-four hours a day in our assisted living services. One of L’Arche’s eleven centres across the UK is located 9-13 Norwood High Street and they held a virtual workshop as part of this consultation.
- **Open Discussion on Temporary Strategies:** Alex Talbot is a lifelong Lambeth resident whose been a long-time campaigner for better housing conditions in the borough. After time spent working in the homeless sector, he made the transition to Local government and now works in the

regeneration division at the London Borough of Croydon. In this open discussion, Alex explained why vacant premises are a problem for local communities and local authorities; how 'meanwhile spaces' bring benefits to local authorities and what the challenges are.

- **Roundtable with Landowners:** This was a private event and invited to this landowner's roundtable were two guest speakers that made a short introduction into the creative regeneration already delivered in Hackney Wick and enabled by the Community interest Group (CIG) 'Creative Wick'. The aim was to explore alternative ways of developing key sites in the KIBA (recently rebranded as 'Norwood Works') and along Norwood High Street which is in keeping with local policy, and protects existing local artists and simultaneously provides attractive development opportunities. To give a new focus to this discussion, this roundtable aimed to highlight key precedents from the demonstrably successful regeneration which has transformed Hackney Wick and find transferable lessons that can be applied to Norwood Works and Norwood High Street.
- **Activity for Children via West Norwood Feast:** This is a West Norwood monthly community event organised by local volunteers. As part of their children's activities, and in collaboration with Movers & Makers, they created an activity to engage young school children in drawing and model-making to explore ideas about the local high street.
- **Exhibition:** we hosted a virtual exhibition with all the results from the public consultation, such as drawings, recordings from the roundtables, the Pecha Kucha presentations, webinars, open discussion, all of this digital content has been compiled and exhibited on this same website. All this content serves as an open source to the public.

The team involved in the project/initiative

Helena Rivera is the director and the founder of A Small Studio. She trained in architecture at the Bartlett (UCL) and the Royal College of Art. Helena is specialised in the British planning system and has a Doctorate (PhD) in Regional Planning from the Bartlett School of Planning (UCL) where research focused on applying transferable lessons from British New Towns into contemporary housing policy. This was done through a community engagement process of recording the oral histories of New Town pioneers. Before setting up A Small Studio Ltd., Helena worked at Alsop Architects on the Rotterdam masterplan and later on The PuBLIC, a Lottery-funded arts centre in West Bromwich. Working with Will Alsop and his team inspired her to promote a multidisciplinary, flexible and non-conventional approach to work. Helena is deeply committed to research, experimentation and materiality. Her interest focuses on the public realm where urban design meets architecture, landscape and planning.

Kalliopi Bouzounieraki is an associate at A Small Studio. She joined the studio in 2017 and has acted as project architect on significant projects based in Nairobi Kenya, Snowdonia National Park in Wales and across South London. Kalliopi is a graduate from the University of Edinburgh where she was awarded a Distinction for her thesis project and dissertation. Her dissertation was written on the conflict between hand drawings and computation systems techniques used in the act of drawing today. Her interest in drawing techniques means she is excellent at translating complex architectural detailing into crisp, clean and well-built project elements. Kalliopi leads a module at the University of Greenwich aimed specifically at teaching students project resolution skills.

Iria Suárez is the material specialist and studio manager at A Small Studio. She trained as a fashion designer in Spain and studied an MA in the History of Design at the Royal College of Art and the Victoria & Albert Museum. She is interested in the design of material culture for children and childhood, and for her dissertation she investigated the history of children's hospitals in London. She worked at the Victoria & Albert museum from 2014-2017, where she consolidated her interest in museums and archiving materiality. Iria is interested in the impact that space and materiality have in society and is an advocate for the promotion of sustainability. She works as the material specialist in A Small Studio and is leading the studio's project on London's first sustainable material library dedicated to the promotion of a circular economy in the construction industry.

Charlotte Ashworth is the manager of Station to Station. The BID would like to see Norwood High Street transformed into a vibrant area, with affordable workspace both along its length and in the streets that feed off it, providing opportunities for local employment and subsequently stimulating the whole BID area's daytime and early evening economy.

Impact or outcomes

The short-term achievements of this initiative are in relation to the shop refurbishment. This project provides a small-scale local pilot project for how empty shops can be re-purposed which would have large-scale regional impact if applied regionally and nationally (the number of empty shops in 2020 -before COVID-19- was at a record high of 12%).

- We have specific quantifiable data about how much it costs to refurbish an empty off-licence shop over 5 years that can be shared.
- We acquired knowledge and expertise of procurement difficulties of refurbishing high street commercial spaces into different uses (B Class or Sui Generis). Getting planning consent towards the conversion of a commercial premises (classified for an A2 use only) into a business (B1 use) or mixed scheme (Sui Generis) with the site located on the high street was very difficult. This was before the Prior Approval changes coming to place, nonetheless Local Authority Planning

Departments could not understand how removing a commercial use could be part of a bigger regeneration strategy. Nevertheless, our experience has been shared and helped other local neighbours who are facing the same issues.

- We are overcoming the complications and challenges that it brings the opening of the shop in the high street, such as security, administration, servicing. Managing the utilities and systems that service the unit has been very difficult. Commercial premises on high streets are not very well serviced other than having electricity off a pre-paid meter, basic bathroom facilities and broadband. In order to convert these premises into co-working space it has been very difficult to arrange fibre access, smart meters and contracts with electrical suppliers and new M&E systems have been installed 'from scratch'. This will be a challenge across all high streets, because the typical commercial premise is serviced with basic provision only. Now we have all the sources and experience to share.
- We are testing the need for flexible hyper local workspaces.
- We are collecting real data that can feed into the neighbourhood plan as a series of recommendations for refurbishment empty shops.
- The high street conversion has created a community space (both internal and external) to host a programme of workshops and events that promotes the integration of the environmental climate change conversation into all our aspects of our life, targeting different ages and demographics.

The long-term achievements of this initiative are the consequences of the community consultation.

- We have collected good evidence that will inform the local Neighbourhood Plan.
- We have developed a cohesive collaborative framework for the area using expertise of architects, landscape architects and planners.
- We have developed a working group of local landowners actively interested in creating a CIG (Community Interest Group) inspired by 'Creative Hackney', which helps mediate between developers and local stakeholders and is a key collaboration. This group follows the key recommendations delivered during the Roundtable with Landowners which suggested that urban change can only happen through collaboration; The key to unlocking successful regeneration is in finding what communities value in their neighbourhood and unlocking local knowledge; Social heritage is the anchor of a place; To have a genuinely mixed-used creative economy you need to protect the fine artists who are the most vulnerable; The affordability has to be protected in perpetuity in order for it to be 'truly sustainable'.
- We began conversations at a high level within Lambeth, with different departments such as Planning, Regeneration, Business Enterprise..., and they have expressed interest in being consulted in the new SPD for the area. Outside of the shopping area Lambeth Council policy is being flexible

with B class uses since it recognises the growing need for workspace. Lambeth Council is trying to introduce interim and alternative uses across sites and spaces. This is to promote meanwhile strategies, interim uses and agile approaches. There is strong argument to champion West Norwood as an area of 'hyper-locality' especially as boroughs seek to widen the focus from central areas and promote hyper locality.

- We have applied for the Sustainable Innovation Fund, although we were not successful, we are searching for different funding schemes that would allow us to develop the project further.
- We developed a Bat Highway with potential to allow for bat-friendly infrastructure, therefore increasing biodiversity.
- We initiated relationships with local public institutions that work with harder-to-reach citizens to keep engaging in more collaborations. For example, we have committed to host a regular workshop with the L'Arche community about the built environment.

Advice for High Streets Task Force users

The timeframe for converting the abandoned high street shop which is a typical high street commercial premise of 50 sqm (540sft) site, was as following:

- 9 months negotiating the sale/ searches for the property/ ease for future occupant
- 4 months negotiating planning consent for a Change of Use with the Local Authority
- 4 months for mobilisation under a minor works contract using a single small-scale contractor
- 1 month for the fit-out and preparation of the co-working facilities

During the period of mobilisation, the community consultation workshop was held as a month-long event using the period of the London Festival of Architecture (LFA) as a platform. This made outreach and communication beyond the local area easier to manage and increased the project visibility.

For this project we are our own clients and it was funded by the coronavirus Bounce Back Loan Scheme (BBLS) that we took and self-funding. This makes it easier to control because we are our own clients. The funds required to repurpose the empty abandoned high-street shop into a habitable, well-ventilated, serviced space for co-working of eight people was the following:

- £70,000+VAT in construction
- £15,000 +VAT in fit-out and
- £4,500 statutory fees (solicitors and Local Authorities planning fees)
- £10,000 + VAT in design and project management fees
- £6,450 + VAT in community consultation and local engagement

In order to guarantee a citizens-led approach that is inclusive, the community consultation must be undertaken on a pro-bono basis by the stakeholders (in this case BID and A Small Studio did the work using their own company resources). This places an onerous task on the stakeholders, and some alternative funding would have been helpful. If we were to repeat this consultation, we would try to find funding.

Undertaking a community consultation during the COVID-19 lockdown had both advantages but also challenges. We had to ensure that those community groups which could not access online workshops easily could participate, nonetheless. With L’Arche for example, this meant distributing printed material before the digital workshop, to ensure that adults with learning difficulties received our material and a small rafts package (supplied by L’Arche) with which to follow activities.

On the other hand, since the event was digital, it also increased participation in terms of the audience outreach (which was far beyond the local residents only); the time zone of participants (for lectures and round-tables we had international participants); and for recording and distributing for those that could not attend (all events were recorded and uploaded onto our Instagram and website).

One key concern amongst the organisers and the stakeholders was to ensure that all the grassroots self-help and support groups that formed during the lockdown (mainly as closed WhatsApp Groups) would remain in place after lockdown. Moving the groups from a virtual/digital platform into a physical space is an important part of that transition and we are hoping the refurbished off-license will act as a community hub where these interactions can continue in the form of:

- Arts & crafts workshops
- Local group meetings
- Flexible co-working spaces
- A material library specifically dedicated to the sustainable ‘circular economy’ materials available refurbishment projects

Contact for Task Force queries

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