

Discuss what can be done to revive high streets and the bricks-and-mortar retail experience to make it more exciting, successful and inclusive for all in a post-pandemic world.

Over the past decades, many traditional high streets have been struggling to compete with online retailers and out-of-town shopping centres, resulting to a reduced footfall and an increased vacancy rate. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, this trend has further exacerbated as people visit high streets less frequently, with evidence showing that high street vacancy rate reaches as high as 12.4 % in the second quarter of 2022 (Allen and Mwananshiku, 2021; British Retail Consortium, 2020). From this, it is clear that traditional high streets are becoming less attractive to consumers and they can no longer meet the changing behaviour and expectation of customers.

One way to revitalise high streets is turning the existing retail spaces into residential conversions. Following the introduction of new 'permitted development rights', vacant and unused commercial buildings can be rebuilt or reused as residential properties, without the need of a full planning permission (Grimwood, 2021). While abandoned units can be brought back to life, their architectural distinction may be deemed appealing to buyers who value stylish living (Hamnett and Whitelegg, 2007). Moreover, their accessible location may attract workers who value accessibility to work and local services. In addition, through provision of job opportunities and re-using brownfield sites, this can be seen as an opportunity to bring vitality back to high streets (Powell, 2021). First, existing shops may also benefit from an increased income, as more people move into the area and consume locally. Second, with fewer vacant properties along the high streets, this increases attractiveness and people feel more safe when navigating in the area.

Nonetheless, it should be noted that careful planning is required to ensure the residential properties converted are of public interest. For example, with concerns over privacy, safety, and noise pollution (Narvaez et al., 2015), commercial-residential buildings can be less attractive to tenants when located next to commercial activities. Therefore, this solution might not be viable for high streets located in city centre. Moreover, since planning applications are not required before the conversion, the newly converted units may not fit the local character and urban fabric, which may result in distortion and discourages investment into the area. Furthermore, with the risk of accumulation of dispossession from property developers, tightened regulations might be required to make sure the newly converted units are affordable, hence, inclusive for all.

In order to revive the retail experience of high street, they will need to move away from the traditional brick-and-mortar retail experience and seek for more engagement at personal level. Since products sold offline can also be seen and sold online, it is necessary to provide a different shopping experience to attract people back to high streets and out-compete online shopping experience. To address this, high streets should be restructured to

become more exciting and unique. On one hand, experience-led features can be added into the street design of high streets to retain pedestrians and encourage people to stop by. Some examples could be introducing water features or play elements, which people can interact to.

Besides, retailers should focus on bringing unique experience and add services that customers cannot experience from screen (Pilkington, 2020), for example by introducing more attractive window displays and interactive elements in-store. Adding experience-led elements into retail experience on high street shops is particular crucial in a post-pandemic setting, as people are looking for more social interactions than before the pandemic (Askarizad et al., 2021).

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