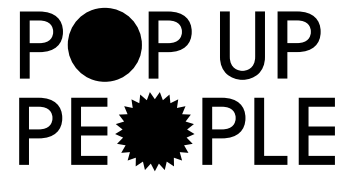

The Pop Up Potential of Property



by Adam Tinworth

Sometimes, our society seems more ineffectual than it actually is. The major issues afflicting our town centres - the rise of online retailing, the growth of the “big box” out of town retailers coupled with the large number of edge of town shopping centres built - are not recent developments. In every case, we’ve had at least a decade to plan for them. And yet, so many of our town centres are semi-inhabited shadows of their former selves. We knew it was coming. We wrote about it and we talked about it. And still we failed to stop it.

And it’s not as if we lack sophistication either. Urban planners and landscape architects have long understood how to model likely people flows around streetscapes, and how to factor in the draws of different styles of buildings - and different occupiers within them. Anchor tenants, prime pitch, retailers that draw footfall down the high street... These are all long explored, researched and understood concepts.

Why then is the situation so bad in so many of our town centres? The figures in the Pop Up People report are damning - something has clearly gone awry. And often when our sophisticated understanding fails to resolve - or prevent - an issue arising, the fault can be found in assumptions that we take as natural, undeniable and fixed. Our understanding, tools and techniques are right, but we’re using them on a false set of precepts. The problem is in the ideas we fail to challenge. And maybe the idea we need to challenge is that a building has a fixed purpose, a *raison d’être* that is somehow encoded into its physical design.

We have developed an odd cultural trait where we see the majority of buildings as being single purpose. Even so-called “mixed-use developments” are rarely truly mixed-use. Individual areas within the space are still demarcated for defined purposes. This is just traditional town-scale urban planning applied to a single building

or development. Perhaps we’ve moved beyond the point where whole sections of the urban landscape take on a specific character based around a singular property type in the last 15 years, but we’re still a long way from the sort of mental flexibility in our approach to the built environment that we need. And we don’t have to look far back into the history of our towns to find examples of a different approach to building use that used to be the norm.

In recent years many forward-thinking congregations in churches have ripped out the traditional pews to create more flexible, usable and friendly spaces within their ecclesiastical buildings. But I wonder how many of both the proponents and the opponents of these schemes are aware of the historical roots of these ideas. In medieval times churches were used extensively as communal spaces for market, meeting and shelter. The “solely spiritual” mode so many are in today is a relatively modern invention. And our Anglican revolutionaries are just taking their congregations back to more communal age.

Even our pubs - our public houses - have forgotten their roots to some degree, the literal public house, a house which opened to the public for conversation, companionship and drinking. Many modern town-centre mega-pubs bear very little relationship to that concept.

Instead of seeing many of our big civic buildings as communal spaces, we’ve evolved a specific building type - the community centre - as if the activity of community can only take place within a particular building type.

So, what happened? When did we lose the ability to see our buildings as versatile sheltered spaces, able to perform different functions at different times?

Our planning system must take some of the blame. It’s rooted in a proscriptive approach to the use of a particular

building that defines it very closely. That's a reasonable system in a period of stability, when the nature of our town centres is in relative stasis, and when a certain amount of intelligent shaping of the commercial aspects of the streetscape can be valuable. But those times are rare, and the legislation that underpins our system cannot adapt quickly enough when circumstance change. Perhaps we should be designing a protective system; one that encourages experimentation in building use, while limiting the worst excesses of commercial impulses.

At the very least, we need a system that's open to experimentation in the short term. It's in the very nature of a pop up project for it to be time-limited and experimental. An extended period of time waiting for a change of use makes some project impossible to pursue at the very time we most need experimentation and innovation.

But we need more than that, too. We need the property development and management industries to open their minds to alternative uses of our building stock. The massive Victorian-era warehouses and industrial premises have proven to be remarkably versatile building shells, moving from industrial to residential, retail and office use with creative redevelopment.

Society is fluid. Its needs change over time, and so buildings - which are replaced on a much slower cycle than the people that inhabit them - need to develop a fluidity that supports that. Pop Up People need places that support them. Lock down potential uses and you lock down their potential for innovation.

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wiki.emptyshopsnetwork.com

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