

Building Community Agency Through The Purposeful Use Of Unused Retail Spaces

Background

Despite the urgent need to mitigate climate change, the fashion sector has continued on an escalating, unsustainable and wasteful trajectory. Fashion is cited as a major contributor to climate change, producing an estimated 1.2 billion tonnes of CO₂ (Co₂e) per year.¹ Further, across the full lifecycle of clothing globally, the industry has an annual carbon footprint of 3.3 billion tonnes CO₂e.²

Yet, in spite of this data, fast-fashion brands such as Shein have continued to grow in revenue and in 2022 were valued at \$100 billion, far more than fast-fashion industry leaders such as Zara and H&M combined.³ Environmental and social issues are endemic in outsourced supply chains such as these and, with policy initiatives in this space currently undeveloped, much onus falls on the consumer to make decisions around sustainability with little information or transparency to assist in this.

To date there has been a disappointing response to the Environmental Audit Committee's 2019 report *Fixing Fashion: Clothing Consumption and Sustainability*. While this demonstrates governmental ambivalence⁴ initiatives like that of 'Textiles 2030' aims to challenge this inaction.⁵ Evidence, moreover, confirms the wider social and psychological benefits of environmental action as countries which do better in terms of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are ranked higher in happiness and wellbeing.⁶ It should be noted that the UK government has put numerous incentives in place to enable climate-positive strategies, such as investing £99 million

¹ Ellen McArthur Foundation (2017) <https://ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/a-new-textiles-economy>

² EAC (2018)

<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/environmental-audit-committee/sustainability-of-the-fashion-industry/written/88396.html>

³ MMU (2022)

<https://www.context.news/money-power-people/opinion/sheins-sudden-rise-the-human-cost-of-fast-fashion>

⁴ MMU (2021) <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/story/14613/>

⁵ WRAP <https://wrap.org.uk/taking-action/textiles/initiatives/textiles-2030>

⁶ World Happiness Report (2020) Chapter 6: Sustainable Development and Human Well-Being

<https://worldhappiness.report/ed/2020/sustainable-development-and-human-well-being/>

into innovative technologies focused on waste and resource management.⁷ However, the *Cleaning Up Fashion* report signalled the need for a more holistic approach to support transition away from purely economic measures of business success and towards a 'wellbeing economy', which prioritises care at all levels of society.⁸ To embed the benefits of a wellbeing economy requires incentives that focus on the social as well as economic benefits of, for instance, design for longer product lifetime, reuse and repair, extended producer responsibility, and consumer education.⁹

The Covid-19 pandemic, Brexit, shifts to digital rather than 'bricks and mortar' shopping, and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis have changed consumer behaviour, alongside record retail closures. In 2021, PWC reported over 17,500 chain stores closed in 2020 alone.¹⁰ More recently, the Centre for Retail Research (CRR) recorded that retail closures affected 34,907 employees in 2022.¹¹ Competition from online retailers, increased spending on leisure and experiences such as short breaks, gym memberships, and health and wellbeing treatments has exacerbated the issues the high street was already facing.¹² A consumer survey by PWC suggested that the onus to repair the high street should not fall solely on retail solutions,¹³ while CRR suggested that remodelling large obsolete stores to add services such as clothing repair, cafes and concessions could provide a solution.¹⁴ Finally, the survey showed that 44% of participants would prefer a focus on experiencing and exploring [a brand] rather than the only option being to purchase.¹⁵

This opens a discussion on the importance of experience, connection and community to rehabilitate the high street and locality, whilst stimulating local business. This shows a clear

⁷ UK Government (2018) Clean Growth Strategy https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/700496/clean-growth-strategy-correction-april-2018.pdf

⁸ *Cleaning Up Fashion* (2021): https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a1431a1e5dd5b754be2e0e9/t/60ec3d173ba7d954d567ee0d/1626094876047/FR_ESF_Cleaning+up+Fashion_Report_2021.pdf

⁹ Ibid; <https://ciemap.leeds.ac.uk/index.php/policy/>

¹⁰ PWC (2021) <https://www.pwc.co.uk/press-room/press-releases/over-17-500-chain-stores-closed-in-2020-with-the-impact-of-the-pandemic-yet-to-be-felt.html>

¹¹ Centre for Retail Research (2023) <https://www.retailresearch.org/retail-crisis.html>

¹² Ibid

¹³ PWC (2022) <https://www.pwc.co.uk/industries/government-public-sector/insights/the-future-of-government/what-does-uk-public-want-from-high-streets.html>

¹⁴ Centre for Retail Research (2023) <https://www.retailresearch.org/retail-crisis.html>

¹⁵ PWC (2022) <https://www.pwc.co.uk/industries/government-public-sector/insights/the-future-of-government/what-does-uk-public-want-from-high-streets.html>

opportunity to align investment to deliver town centres that reclaim maximum impact to a specific place with a focus on hyper-locality.

S4S: Designing a Sensibility for Sustainable Clothing: Project & Findings

“The good things about this project have been the community of doing things and making things together, that space for people to spend time together because so much life now is separate families or separate people in their own homes with their doors shut, and high fences in the back garden and not going out and doing things together.”

S4S project participant

S4S¹⁶ is a large UKRI-funded (AH/K005243/1) interdisciplinary project conducted between fashion and policy researchers that combined participatory fashion and textile research with social science methods. The central aim was to investigate the extent to which and how making in community stitch groups could change fashion thinking to promote pro-environmental clothing behaviours. The research team worked with over fifty participants to co-design and trial a set of research tools: wardrobe audits, clothing diaries, participatory stitch workshops, data interviews, and reflective films.

Findings revealed that change came from collective acts of making, reflecting and sharing, repurposing and repairing existing garments. Three major drivers for successful behaviour change emerged: connection with a like-minded community to reinforce behaviour, affectual engagement with the materiality of garments to realise change, and personal investment – clothing behaviour change aligned with changes in other aspects of life and identity (employment, family circumstances etc.). A new set of priorities emerged for participants – to care for clothes, respect and value them, pay attention to how they connect us to others, and other versions of ourselves. The personal becomes political and the wardrobe a quietly activist space for social, economic, and political agency and change.

The project’s contribution to the 2019 *Fixing Fashion Report*¹⁷ recommended that making, repair, and repurposing hubs be established in shops, galleries, schools, and community spaces to normalise such activities, up-skilling and educating consumers as prosumers, while shopping to reinvigorate the high street. Embracing slow-fashion, such experiential shopping spaces and

¹⁶ S4S Project (2019) <https://s4sproject-exeter.uk/what-is-s4s/>

¹⁷ Written Evidence (2018)

<http://data.parliament.uk/WrittenEvidence/CommitteeEvidence.svc/EvidenceDocument/Environmental%20Audit/Sustainability%20of%20the%20fashion%20industry/Written/88218.html>

practices would also provide new business opportunities for sustainable fashion brands, as well as supporting people to be active in their own communities.¹⁸

Charity Super.Mkt Case Study

An example of the purposeful use of unused retail spaces was the recent launch of Charity Super.Mkt at Brent Cross Shopping Centre, which was brought together by Maria Chenoweth CEO of Traid and Wayne Hemingway of Hemingway Design. This utilised Topshop's former space, which was vacant, and allowed consumers to shop from a curated collection of quality, second-hand fashion and accessories from a cross-section of charity retailers.¹⁹

Charity Super.Mkt provided a solution in bringing charity retail into the 21st century; giving a new, long term, worthwhile purpose, to vacant large-scale retail spaces in towns and cities; and demonstrated a sustainable way forward for retail, whilst providing a new anchor for high streets.

Maria Chenoweth, CEO of Traid said:

"Charity Super.Mkt exists to make good business the new norm, imagine walking into a store where you can buy something that makes you feel good whilst your money spent does good—from funding issues such as homelessness to stopping cancer, organic cotton production to funding the nurses that give end of life care."

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Charity Supermarket (2023) <https://www.charitysupermkt.com>



Re-imagining The High Street For Prosumption

According to the Indices of Deprivation in 2019, Manchester is the sixth most deprived area in the UK.²⁰ Like the rest of the UK, Manchester has faced mass closures in retail, with big brands such as Topshop, Dorothy Perkins, Burtons and Debenhams closing their doors. Homesense in the Arndale Shopping Centre and Boots in the Salford Shopping Centre have announced their closures over the coming months.²¹

Conversely, Pro-Manchester the largest business development organisation in the North West representing the business community, offered examples of businesses that have diversified and thrived despite facing the same retail pressures²²:

- Primark has diversified its offerings through the implementation of services such as beauty salons, as well as a cafe.
- Manchester Locals Feel Good Club have combined the ability to dine whilst being able to seek mental health advice, events and pop-up shops in store.

²⁰ Manchester City Council (2019)

https://www.manchester.gov.uk/info/200088/statistics_and_intelligence/2168/deprivation

²¹ Manchester Evening News (2023)

<https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/uk-news/every-tk-maxx-new-look-26225569>

²² Pro-Manchester (2022) <https://www.pro-manchester.co.uk/manchester-retail-sector/>

Policy recommendations include:

- Salford City Council missed out on the Levelling Up Fund for its Eccles Shopping Centre regeneration project. Similarly, Manchester City Council missed out on its plans for Wythenshawe town centre. While both councils wait for funding, we recommend zero rent/rates for pop-up stores testing the Charity Super.Mkt model with the addition of S4S workshops in mending and repurposing clothing diversifying this offering.
- Tackling vacancies on the high-street should sit within wider council priorities and strategies moving forward. Having this alignment built in, would bolster buy-in from council departments (this is crucial if red-tape could prove an issue, i.e. change of ownership).
- Establish an evidence base to support schemes which tackle vacancy. This is supported by the Local Government Association who suggest using a Vacant Possession Tracker, recording ownership and leases, and how the scheme provides community value, including public perception. This provides supporting data for potential continuation of the scheme, as well as offering a direction for how the project should evolve.
- Further exploration of this concept under a Social Value Lease, which is currently being piloted in the London Borough of Haringey. This lease allows for an ascription of a monetary value to social value outcomes, such as the number of people employed as well as the total amount spent in the local supply chain.
- Also, further exploration of the 'Preston Model' could be looked at. The local council procured its services from local companies, then invited public employers to do the same. This strategy led to Preston becoming the first living wage employer in the North of England.²³

²³ The Guardian (2021)

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/may/17/paint-your-town-red-matthew-brown-rhian-e-jones-review-how-preston-took-back-control-and-your-town-can-too>

Further Reading

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