

Reimagining where we live: cultural placemaking and the levelling up agenda Inquiry February 2022

The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee

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Dr Degen's research on the organisation of sensory and temporal experiences has shaped strategies for the spatial design, curatorial practices and activity plans museums across Europe. Her research on the importance that experiences play in shaping the quality of life in cities have influenced the public realm redesign in the City of London and Barcelona who have incorporated these insights into their planning policies.

Executive Summary

This submission outlines recommendations to the following area: How can culture reanimate our public spaces and shopping streets? Culture encompasses a wide range of aspects of urban life and environment from vernacular architecture, graffiti or buskers to the availability of benches to sit and observe life passing by, or access to a local library. Culture does not need to be 'imported' but is already existent in places, yet may need to be highlighted or emphasized more.

This response suggests framing the animation of streets and public spaces around a conscious evaluation and development of experiences which is based on collaborative local research, design and event planning to identify local cultural assets.

An emphasis on sensory experiences leads to stronger place attachments, a more wide and diverse range of uses and improvements in the quality of life and well-being.

Based on my 20 years of research of urban redevelopments in Barcelona, Manchester, Qatar, Milton Keynes, Bedford and London I make the following recommendations:

1. The development of collaborative sensory design approaches between planners, event managers, locals, and visitors to highlight and develop cultural engagements with specific localities.
2. Diversify the temporal cycles of use of a locality to incorporate a broader variety of uses and cultural engagements.
3. Provide opportunities for meaningful points of contact for a diversity of users of public spaces to create a cultural atmosphere.
4. Address and encourage a diversity of cultural experiences in a specific locality.

Background

- Culture is made tangible through the experiences it produces in people. Culture, broadly defined as ‘a way of life’, is expressed through everyday behaviours, the local architecture and other vernacular environmental and social features as much as through concrete cultural outputs such as music, food or performances.
- It is linked to place by the particular atmospheres or ‘senses of place’ it creates. These senses of place mediate how we perceive places and whether we engage with places and people. Based on a range of previous research projects, including a recent assessment of Uxbridge High Street in West London, we suggest the following approaches to use culture to foster a more engaged and broader use of public spaces and shopping streets.

1. Develop collaborative sensory design approaches

- 1.1 Sensory experiences and emotions are relational processes, they are the connective tissues that both describe and create relations between place and the self. The way that we interpret our surroundings is guided as much by our emotions and memories as vision, sounds, smells, textures, tastes that we encounter, which create distinctive senses of place and shape how we feel and interact with a place whether we consider it inviting to linger or pass through quickly.
- 1.2 Public spaces and their culture are evaluated by users through ‘the feel’ of space or ‘atmosphere’. Urban planning and event management professionals need to establish firstly through research what visual, sensory and spatial characteristics already define a public place or set a shopping street apart. Then a comprehensive strategy needs to work out how existing cultural assets in the built environment can be emphasized or brought to light through a diversity of small-scale interventions such as lighting or sound. An example is this [sensory toolkit](#).
- 1.3 Collaborative sensory design should be integrated in any redevelopment of public spaces or shopping streets to foster identification, surprise and multiple uses. Sensory design involves taking ‘insider knowledge’ seriously and designing the future public spaces with those who know it best namely its users, residents and visitors in collaboration with local planners and designers.
- 1.4 For example, in research conducted on Uxbridge High Street users asked for more green spaces, more flowers, more vibrancy in the High Street, both visually and sensorially. Designing public spaces through the lens of sensory-emotional experiences allows the creation of a more dynamic and vibrant town centres leading to an increase in footfall and local pride.
- 1.5 Thinking more carefully about textures, colours, and other sensory engagements both on foot level, eye level and above improves users’ experiences in and associations with

public spaces. For example, the City of London has used a variety of public art initiatives to create unexpected encounters through soundwalks. A more simple solution is to find a common design language for pavement tiles that reflect the local vernacular identity or history as, for example, in [Barcelona](#). My research has demonstrated that sensory engagements in public spaces from historical plaques to live music, pantomime or fruit sellers supports place attachments and uses of public spaces.

- 1.6 Local culture and local place engagements within place activation activities should be a core element of any place making strategy to change perceptions or attract new audiences. Good examples in the UK include the City of London, that is diversifying its focus from finance to tourism by implementing the [Culture Mile](#) and has been organizing both a range of public events and community strengthening activities to showcase the rich culture of an area neglected by tourism.

2. Focus on diverse temporal cycles

- 2.1. Temporal dimensions shape the daily rhythms of urban life. Everyday practices by residents and users shape the dynamics of public spaces in cities and have an important influence in the feel of places. The atmosphere of public spaces and shopping streets vary hugely according to the time of day and the flows and activities of the people that use it. This in turn affects how people experience these spaces and the emotional and sensory associations given to them. For example, for the [Sensory Smithfield project](#) the Museum of London collaborated with Brunel University London to identify the temporal uses of the Smithfield area. It has incorporated the findings to inform the masterplan of the new Museum of London and to integrate the museum into the public spaces of the area, see also <http://sensorysmithfield.com/report/>
- 2.2. Events and cultural performance planning needs to take into account the temporal cycles of use in public spaces. Events and performances need to cater for different social groups at different times or animate spaces at 'dead times'. See, for example, this report on the importance of considering temporal parameters in urban planning: <http://sensescitiescultures.com/report/>
- 2.3. UK public spaces and shopping streets still have a tendency to be segregated temporarily by specific social groups and age groups using public spaces at particular times. This creates a range of problems, from city or town centres becoming mono-functional to parallel engagements where different social groups never meet as they use the same space at different times. Socially, this leads to a more segregated society. More diverse cultural activities need to be planned across age groups and time zones to foster a more heterogenous use of space which leads to an improved quality of life. Public spaces need to have more flexible and adaptive planning strategies. These could include interventions such as a colourful playpark drawn on the floor, a temporary waterpark for children and movable street furniture to encourage more diverse uses.

3. Provide moments and places of contact to create a cultural atmosphere

- 3.1.** Public spaces should foster activities, events and spaces of engagement beyond retail to create a cultural atmosphere. People like to be amongst other people and have points of contact and moments of recognition whether bumping into friends, shopkeepers that recognise them or random chats with strangers. Such moments add to a sense of place and psychological and emotional well-being.
- 3.2.** Public places provide an anonymous social infrastructure for individuals to spend time in and engage with different cultures and social groups. Recent research has shown that with the increased [privatization](#) of public spaces in the UK, and across the world, high streets or public places tend to cater mainly for retail or dining and drinking activities. More free and serendipitous moments of contact should be provided on high streets and public spaces by encouraging broader use of public spaces. This could be in the form of formal or informal programming of activities, events and performances throughout the whole year. These should be locally distinct and relevant, and can be supported by local schools, universities, colleges and community groups that would attract a diversity of ages, ethnic groups and uses of space. This would lead to more a more cohesive local community and safer uses of public spaces. An example is the successful skater park in Southbank that attracts as much young people skating as different social groups and ages watching.
- 3.3.** Empty shop units can be turned into community spaces that work to draw more footfall and encourage reciprocal uses and increase dwelling time or into a 'chatting space' supported by different local charities and the library such as the [chatting benches](#) in Newcastle or the [The Human Library](#) project across cities in the world where you can 'borrow' a person to understand their lived reality or situation better.

4. Foster diverse cultural experiences

- 4.1.** Ensuring diversity in the appeal of public spaces is key to cater to the UK's diverse population. Hence, planners should resist the temptation to always 'upgrade' the type of retail and hospitality businesses in a specific locality – but attend both to outsiders visiting as well as consider the needs of the local diverse socio-economic and ethnic groups.
- 4.2.** Diverse experiences can be fostered by showcasing the diverse histories and cultures that have influenced the development a public space or street, from offering a historical trail that highlights the involvement of diverse cultural or ethnic groups in the building of towns and cities to the celebration of key dates for different cultures.
- 4.3.** Public spaces used by a diversity of ethnic groups is highly cherished and enjoyed as a way of engaging with different cultures and regarded as a unique identity feature. This could be further encouraged by a diversity of (pop-up) restaurants and cafes that cater for different food tastes and incomes and celebrate different cultural festivities more regularly.

Relevant readings and websites:

[Sensory Cities | AHRC Sensory Cities Network](#)

sensorysmithfield.com

[Report \(sensorysmithfield.com\)](#)

[Final Report | Timescapes of Urban Change \(sensescitiescultures.com\)](#)

- Degen, M. et al (2021) Reimagining Uxbridge High Street. Brunel University London. Attached to this submission or available from the author.
- Degen, M. & Lewis, C. (2020) "The changing feel of place: an analysis of temporal atmospheres in Smithfield Market, London". [Cultural Geographies](#), 27 (4), 509-526.
- Degen, M. (2018) "Timescapes and Urban Change: the street". [Sociological Review](#), 66 (5) 1074-1092.
- Degen, M. (2017) "Urban Regeneration and Resistance: Foregrounding Time and Experience". [Space and Culture](#), 20 (2) 141-155.
- Degen, M. & Rose, G. (2012) "The Sensory experiencing of Urban Design: The role of walking and Perceptual memory". [Urban Studies](#), 49(15) 3271-3287.
- Degen, M. & Garcia, S. (2012) "The transformation of the 'Barcelona model': an analysis of culture, urban regeneration and governance". [International Journal of Urban and Regional Research](#), 36(5), 1022-1038.