

Fulcrum

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**alright,
still.**

d.knight

Behind the headline-grabbing collapses of Woolworths and HMV, there lies a more profound change to London's suburban high streets that could consolidate them once more as places of sociability. My example is Barking, in East London.

On the back of a speculative wave of railway building in 1903, Barking grew at a spectacular rate into a substantial suburb. Typically, it got its houses first, and its social spaces second. These spaces, when they arrived, were provided by private individuals and organisations, rather than by the state. They took the form of high street shopping parades, pubs (one mock tudor, one art-deco), living rooms, and a substantial modernist cinema called 'The State'.

Places like Barking were disapproved of by planners and men of taste. Clough Williams-Ellis, man of taste *par excellence*, wrote a scathing attack on them called 'England and the Octopus', illustrated by photographs contrasting polite neo-Georgian banks with vulgar petrol stations and bungalows. The book's epilogue was supplied by Patrick Abercrombie, who would later author the County of London Plan which would set the tightly-ordered tone of post-1948 planning.

In this period, places like Barking, whose very existence stood as an affront to the idea of a nationally-coordinated planning system, were generally ignored rather than confronted. Consequently, their social spaces remained the 'private civics' of the pub, the cinema, the shopping parade, the living room — in contrast to the shiny civic centres of the New Towns.

For Barking, this situation changed when it became part of Greater London in 1965. An extraordinary series of civic buildings followed; in particular, a library and swimming pool complex designed by Frederick Gibberd, planner of Harlow New Town. These buildings spoke of a new civic identity for Barking, but, however politically timely, they were just out of date in their attitude to the high street. Two years after Robert Venturi

had declared Main Street as 'almost alright', heralding a new respect for the popular built environment on the part of planners and architects, Gibberd's buildings hardly engaged with the high street at all, facing it with a series of blank elevations.

In recent years, high streets like Barking have become understood not only as 'alright', but as central to London's economy. They support more employment than the Central Activities Zone, and two thirds of Londoners live within five minutes walk of one.

In terms of vacancy and independent retail, outer London high streets are trouncing central shopping areas: only one of London's ten best is in a central borough. This has all occurred generatively and unplanned, rooted in the pre-planning boomtowns of suburbia.

Initiatives like the Outer London Fund are currently investing in suburban high streets, not because they need help, but because of their centrality, which is not only economic but political — witness the importance of the outer London boroughs at election time.

Past generations' disdain for the suburban high street has proven to be misjudged.

My office is working in Barking to reinforce the high street, and a new town square, as a centre of both retail and non-retail uses, a social 'middle' that finally connects the civic ambition of Gibberd with the ad-hoc vitality of the high street. We're also running an open call called 'Barking Frontages', which expands a shopfront improvement programme to include civic buildings and public spaces, on the basis that these could learn from the high street, rather than just the other way around. High streets like Barking are well placed to thrive in a society that, however much stuff it buys from Amazon, still needs somewhere to have a swim, a hair cut, go dancing, and pick up the post. These places are not dying, they're mutating. Hopefully we can learn from the ad-hoc sociability of Barking's birth in the making of its future.

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**civic
capital.**

h.mcewen

"Places that offer a vibrant civic realm will inevitably attract and retain investment. More than that, however, an active civic life connects people in important ways and gives them a sense of belonging. Where we are surrounded by buildings and spaces preserved from the past or built for the future, we come to feel ourselves members of a community bigger than any single one of us. As we get used to sharing spaces, we feel part of a shared world." *Ben Rogers, Reinventing the Town Hall, Institute for Public Policy Research.*

Our high streets are not just full of deserted shops, they have become barren of use or relevance to society. With loss of faith in high street banks, foreclosure of retail institutions and the inability of local authorities to invest in social projects, the high street has been stripped of the possibility to provide a social space that has civic use or meaning. Society has a need for civic spaces, yet it is impossible to find a contemporary civic style apart from that lambasted by Matthew Darbyshire.

The expenses scandal, institutional neglect, and the sale of cultural heritage have tainted much of what we currently view as 'the civic'.

Yet there's a memory. In banks turned wine bars and pubs turned bookshops, and stronger still in town halls. Can we learn from these vestiges in order to create new civic spaces for the high street?

The high street is an intrinsically public place, yet this is under threat through tighter restrictions on public activities, and by private ownership. Rather than tactics of cafe culture or shopping malls, civic space — a space with public use and public symbolism — needs to be re-established. The creation of civic space has been a concern of many buildings, the most apt of which is the Stoa. This was both a market and a space for democratic discussion. While it might not be possible

to recreate the democratic spaces of the Greek Forum in full, it is possible to create communal uses associated with shops. Through smoking rooms, public toilets and bus shelters, social spaces attached to high street vendors need to be created. In the process of borrowing a lighter, chatting on a bench and eavesdropping in a queue, we engage with society. These social spaces return value to the high street as a place to discuss, essential to maintaining a healthy civic life.

But how can these additions be made valuable to the polis? They need to engage with the collective memory of the high street's social use. As Muf, and other practices have shown, this history need not be real, but it can still give places a civic tone. Local materials, vernacular forms and antique items create a common ownership — like a flag or a football shirt — and serve to engage the population in the civic space at the same time as symbolising the people using it. But these symbols are only powerful while high streets retain civic spaces; it is precisely because the social use of the building lives up to its architectural promises of public occupancy that this language is successful.

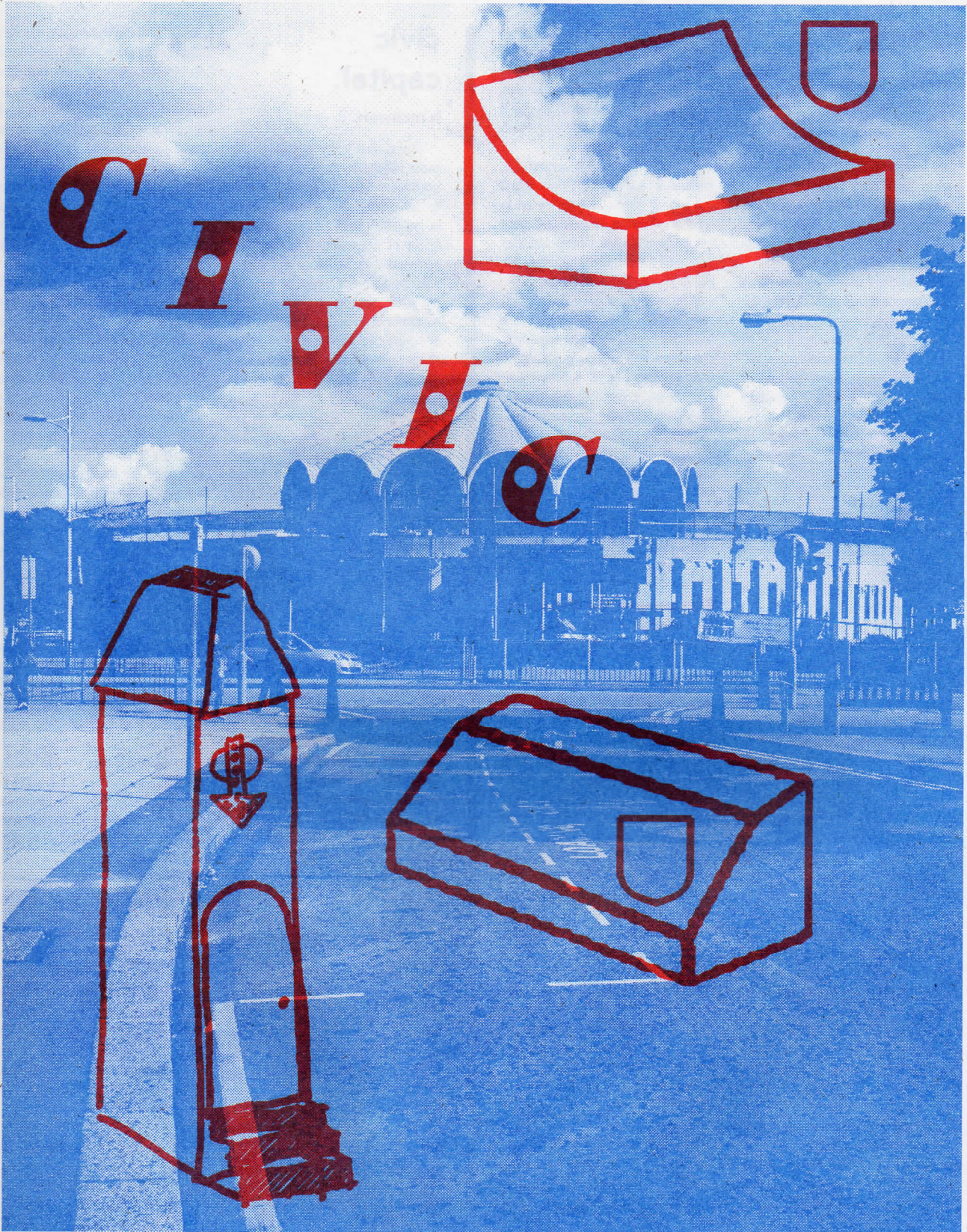
There must also be a contemporary relevance to these civic spaces. Shop fronts tend to be obsessed with omnipotent branding, and appear cookie-cutter like against the unique streets they are placed on. Byron's faux individualism is not the antidote either, rather, where local signs are kept or made they give ownership to local citizens, through the internalisation of their particularity. While it is difficult to stretch to the idea that shoppers own the shop, they certainly could own the civic space on the high street — if only for a short time.

It is naive to assume that high streets can compete with internet shopping and out of town retail, yet they could be worth much more than either. Civic spaces that provide social space and a representation of the community using them will increase this civic value. We do not need high streets for their shops, we need them for their people.

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Fiction

THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST OF ENGLAND



Welcome to Barkingside!