THE DIVERSE NATURE OF HIGH STREETS

FROM UNDESIRED SPACES TO POTENTIAL OPPORTUNITIES

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Table of Contents

Places where the bell always pings as you open the door, the air hits you warm as you walk inside and a smile greets you. Most of all, they are places where people chat and collect news, exchange gossip and advice, meet, greet and love-or sometimes hate-their neighbours. Even as a six-year-old, I know there is a world enclosed in the four tiny letters of the word 'shop'.

Mary Portas *Shop Girl*

Introduction

Key words:

diversity, high streets, ethnicity, identity, destination, liminal spaces, migration, strong social bond

At every turn, London has surprised and fascinated me with its diversity. For me, it is a place where historic architecture intertwines with modern one, numerous languages and accents mix in the urban bustle, and people of different nationalities, cultures and religions pass each other on the street every day. It is a common sight to see Indian restaurants neighbouring Chinese, Bangladeshi or Mexican ones filling the urban space with a multicultural mix of smells. All these diverse and seemingly incompatible elements combine to form a well-functioning urban organism. It was this heterogeneity that encouraged me to take a closer look at its presence on the streets of London, and more specifically on London's famous high streets.

High streets consist of independent shops whose ranges have catered to the local community for many years.[1] In addition to their primary service functions, they provide an important environment for cultural exchange and are of local and town-building importance.[2] Moreover, in an ethnically diverse city like London, shopping streets are often the only opportunity for foreign residents to find work, set up businesses and be themselves in public spaces.

Unfortunately, dynamic economic, technological and cultural changes pose a real threat to high streets. The increase in the number of cars in the city, the growth of e-commerce and the emergence of more and more shopping centres and supermarkets are reducing the need and desire to shop in small, local shops.[3] The streets themselves are no longer the final destination for residents. Due to a lack of customers, a growing amount of shops are being closed by traders. Empty premises deter the remaining clientele and attract crime. It causes a vicious circle - more places are abandoned, scaring away more customers, so more shops are forced to close.[4]

The reanimation of the slowly dying high streets is increasingly resonating in public discussion. Local authorities are looking for ways to encourage new entrepreneurs to create businesses that could attract new customers. In most cases, it is said that a positive way out of this situation is to open a variety of independent up-markets.[5] However, this solution automatically excludes many marginalised social groups, including migrants, who often depend on the ever-diminishing range of facilities on the shopping streets and for whom these spaces still have a cultural role.

However, not all parts of the high streets are becoming empty. In the urban space, we can still see thriving establishments that are visited by numerous customers. Many of these are run by migrants, who, although often regarded as hard-working and respectable Londoners, their shops and restaurants tend to be seen as a negative aspect that diminishes the quality of the high streets.[6] Nevertheless, they have a significant impact on the appearance of the streets. A strong social bond is often formed around them, which, despite various problems and sometimes even resentment from others, gives the city a unique character. This study aims to explore the parts of high street that are still willingly used by diverse ethnic groups and perversely, rather than trying to protect them from new policies and gentrification, I want to ‚learn from them' and find out what makes these spaces still of value to these groups. Perhaps learning about this essence of the streets that still work could prove to be a flashpoint for the revitalisation of other dying parts of the high streets.

Research Question(s)

To stop the exclusion of marginalised ethnic groups from urban spaces and to learn about and benefit from their way of forming social connections and identities of place, this study is guided by the following main question:

How can the material and non-material patterns visible in ethnically diverse high streets be applied to protect and revitalise London's declining shopping streets making them again a destination for residents?

The research aims to analyse London's high streets at multiple scales - at both the city and community scales, so additional questions are presented below to help answer the main research question:

- **How** can High Streets be transformed from liminal spaces to destinations for Londoners? **When** does space decline?

- **What** function types are found in shopping streets characterised by high ethnic diversity in addition to primary retail premises? At **which** functions do strong social bonds form, and at **which** ones do frequent anti-social behaviour become noticeable?

- In **which** places do ethnic groups most often form strong social bonds? In **which** places do ethnic groups present their identities?

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1 Jan Bagiński and Dominika Kubieniec, "High Street", Rzut 17 Ulica: 34
2 Phil Hubbard, The battle for the High Street: retail gentrification, class and disgust (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 15
3 Bagiński, Kubieniec, "High Street", 41-42

4 Hubbard, The battle for the High Street, 20-21
5 Hubbard, The battle for the High Street, 21-22
6 Hubbard, The battle for the High Street, 26

Theoretical Framework

In aiming to accurately analyse such a complex system as London's high streets, the theoretical framework is divided into three sub-groups dealing with other standpoints - examining ways of analysing the existing urban environment, focusing on street spaces, and studying sociological and anthropological aspects.

First - Learning from...

"Learning from the existing landscape is a way of being revolutionary for an architect."[1]

These were the words of the authors of *Learning from Las Vegas: the forgotten symbolism of architectural form*, which became my starting point and the book itself a model for research. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, and students researched various aspects of the city and, more specifically, the famous ‚The Strip'. The result of their study of patterns, styles and symbolism in architecture became a critique of modern architecture. For me, the complementary literature to the above book will be a collection of essays published as *Relearning from Las Vegas*, which describe the issues that directly have been influenced by the work of Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour.

In *The Strip: Las Vegas and the architecture of the American dream*, Stefan Al analyses the various transformations that „The Strip" has undergone, suggesting that these reflect the changes that have taken place in America itself. In doing so, he argues that the architecture of Las Vegas represents the numerous architectural trends and the economic, cultural and social changes that have taken place over the years.

Second - (High) Streets

"(...) the High Street has long been idealized as the focus of community life, a lively shopping street that makes urban life at worst, bearable and, at best, immensely pleasurable."[2]

A key focus of the study is to understand the challenges that high streets have faced and continue to face and how this has changed their character over the years. Phil Hubbard, in his book *The Battle for The High Streets*, describes the formation of high streets in an era of gentrification and changes in retail. He focuses not only on the economic aspects but also on the sociological and political - showing how certain decisions by the authorities can affect the poorer working class, for whom the high streets still play an important role by providing them close and relatively cheap access to essential products.

Matthew Carmon's article *London's local high streets: the problems, potential and complexities of mixed street corridors* examines street corridors through an analysis of high streets, starting with the problems faced by such streets nationally, through specific studies in London. The article demonstrates the strategic potential of streets both for the city as a whole and for the local community.

Third - Anthropological and Sociological Research

"Each world has its own sensory inputs, so that what crowds people of one culture does not necessarily crowd another."[3]

American anthropologist Edward T. Hall was concerned with describing interactions between people from different ethnic groups. For his research, he introduced the term *proxemics* [„the study of how people communicate non-verbally by the way they use the space between themselves and other people"].[4] His books will allow me to better understand the behavioural and perceptual mechanisms that govern ethnic groups and how they manifest in space.

To complement Hall's books, I will use *Anthropology for architects: social relations and the built environment* by Ray Lucas, in which the author considers what architects can learn from anthropologists. Each chapter has been written around a different type of space illustrating how designers can be more attentive to the social dimension of architecture responding to people's needs. This position may prove indispensable during my design process.

The theme of migration is explored in the book *Arrival City. How the largest migration in history is reshaping our world* by Saunders, in which the writer presents migration not as a problem but as new possibilities, and the migrants themselves as opportunists full of aspirations. Understanding their pivotal role in shaping Western cities will be crucial in answering my main research question. Pronkhorst, Provoost and Vanstiphout explore similar themes in their book *A City of comings and goings*, where they present a catalogue of projects that address the issue of migration at multiple scales.
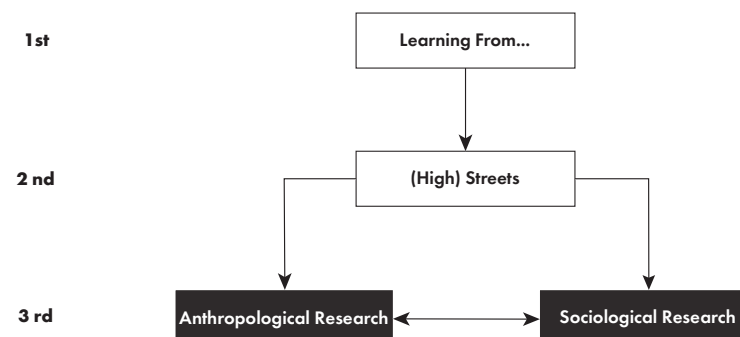

figure 2 - theoretical framework subdivision diagram

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1 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1985), 6
2 Hubbard, *The battle for the High Street*, 15
3 Edward T. Hall, *The hidden dimension* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 6
4 Oxford Reference, s.v. „proxemics", accessed October 10, 2022, https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100351542

Methods & Methodology

The research's main aim is to examine a few examples of London's ethnically diverse high streets as a case study for a later project. As part of the study, these streets should belong to a single strand of ‚connected high streets' called ‚The Strip' for the research. It should run through relatively diverse areas of London, both in terms of ethnic diversity, which is key to answering the main research question, as well as about land prices, crime problems, access to public transport, or earnings. The sample high streets subsequently selected will be studied using a range of methods relating to different scales of the city.
Selected research methods are presented below concerning the scale to which they relate:

- **Mapping** of ethnic groups, deprivation areas, average resident earnings, crime problems, property prices, public transport and population density, in order to select ‚The Strip', from which individual high streets will be analysed at a later stage.
Tools used: GIS maps, digital statistical maps
Scale: city scale

- **Reviewing government strategies and economic data** on London's high streets will provide a broader understanding of the socio-economic context and issues relating to the management of shopping streets both at a citywide and individual borough scale. In further analysis of the selected case studies, the information gained will be relevant to understand the relationship between the appearance and performance of individual streets and their location within a particular administrative unit.
Tools used: legal documents, digital statistical maps, government website
Scale: city scale, neighbourhood scale

- The analysis of the **street profiles** will later allow me to investigate the relationship between the shape of the streets (width, number of carriageway lanes, presence of cycle paths and greenery, height of buildings) and the social activity that takes place in the selected locations.
Tools used: Google Earth

Scale: street scale, building scale

- The **catalogue of buildings** located along main streets and in neighbouring and back streets will allow me an examination what functions are situated along the streets and the impact they have on their appearance. At a later stage of the analysis, the catalogue will help establish which functions the community is formed and which are currently missing.
Tools used: GIS maps, Google Maps, fieldwork
Scale: street scale, building scale

- **Social media** will allow me to get to know people using the high streets from a different perspective. The material that people upload online is selected by them, meaning that they show exactly what they want to be seen, what has some value to them. Additionally, the locations shown online and the frequency with which they are posted can illustrate which places are particularly documented by people. However, it is crucial to remember that social media can often distort reality, so it is treated as an additional layer of information that only has its value when complete with the other analyses.
Tools used: Instagram hashtags and photos, Tik Tok videos, Twitter posts, Google Maps reviews and ratings
Scale: street scale, building scale, community scale

- Creating a series of observational and descriptive **sketches** in the form of a small comic book during the fieldwork will provide a more accurate picture of the main streets. In addition, the drawings will be enhanced with fieldwork notes highlighting important elements.
Tools used: sketches, field notes
Scale: street scale, building scale, community scale

- **(Auto)photography** taken by me while in the field will present the material life of the high streets being studied. The challenge will be to capture the daily life of the streets and the community while being an outsider. To do this, I intend to ask a se-

lection of people I meet during the interviews to take a few photos during the day that they think to capture the essence of the streets they use and then send them to me. Thereby I will be able to find out the deeper meaning of the streets.
Tools used: photographs
Scale: street scale, building scale, community scale

- **Interviews** with people met on selected high streets will allow me to identify their needs and opinions on the shopping streets of London, as well as to learn about the social network they form. It will involve creating a set of questions that I will ask selected people, permitting me to gather consistent data. The questions should be

specific yet flexible. At a later stage, the interviews conducted will allow me to create ‚street biographies'.
Tools used: interviews in the field
Scale: community scale

- **Spatiotemporal analysis** will capture what is not visible at first glance. By analysing the opening hours of premises located on selected high streets and mapping the movement of chosen people, I will be able to gain a closer insight into how streets work. Combined with the other analyses, I will create a timeline recording daily street life.
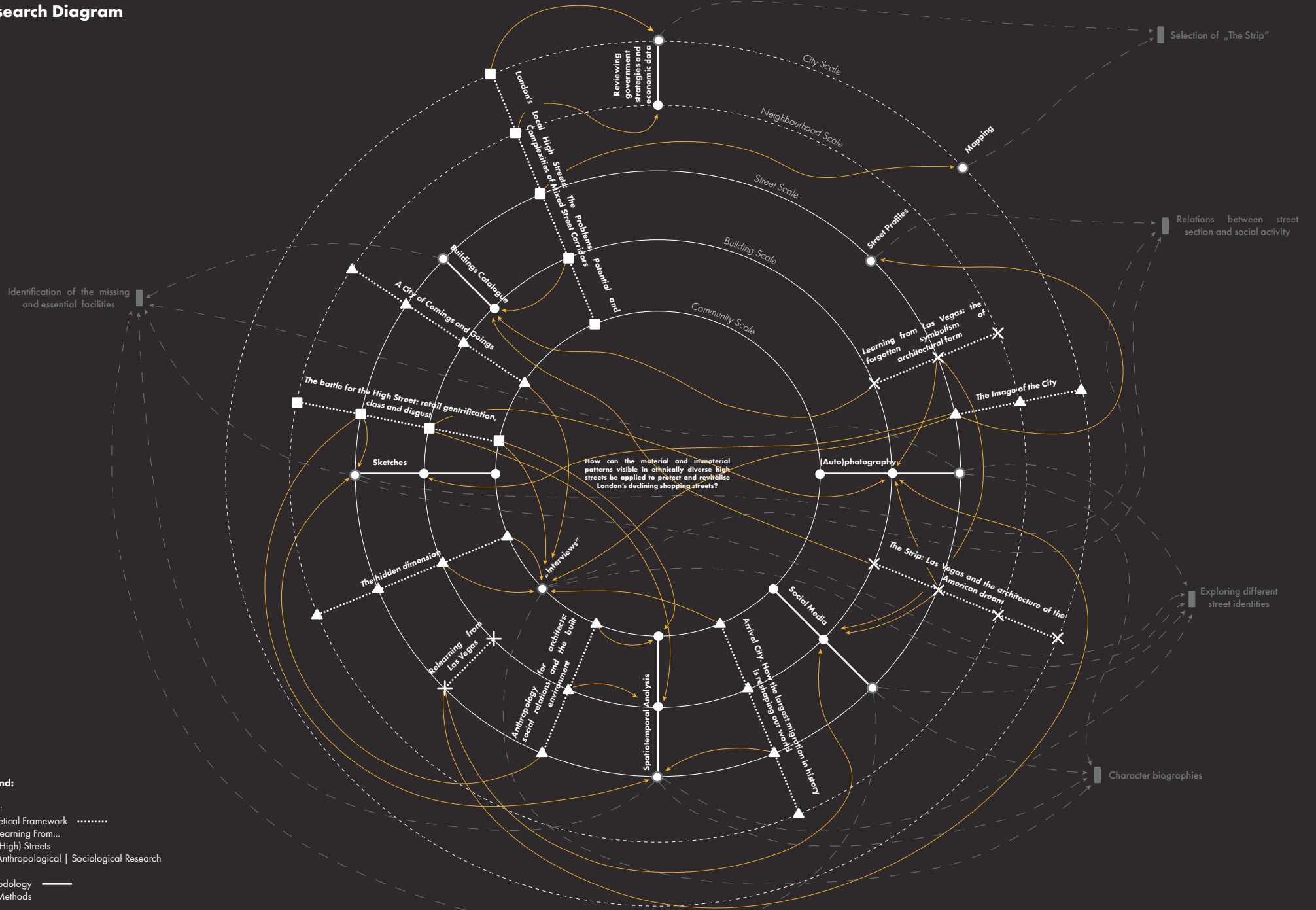Tools used: sketches, Google Maps, field notes
Scale: street scale, building scale, community scale

figure 3 - the location of London's high streets with „the strips" marking and deprivation areas, average resident earnings, crime problems, property prices and population density

Research Diagram

Center question: How can the material and immaterial patterns visible in ethnically diverse high streets be applied to protect and revitalise London's declining shopping streets?

Scales (concentric rings):
- City Scale
- Neighbourhood Scale
- Street Scale
- Building Scale
- Community Scale

Methods (nodes):
- Reviewing government strategies and economic data
- Mapping
- Street Profiles
- Buildings Catalogue
- Sketches
- (Auto)photography
- Interviews
- Social Media
- Spatiotemporal Analysis

Theoretical Framework / Inputs (labels):
- London's Local High Streets: The Problems, potential and Complexities of Mixed Street Corridors
- A City of Comings and Doings
- The battle for the High Street: retail gentrification, class and disgust
- The hidden dimension
- Relearning from Las Vegas
- Anthropology for architects: social relational and the built environment
- Arrival City: How the largest migration in history is reshaping our world
- The Strip: Las Vegas and the architecture of the American dream
- The Image of the City
- Learning from Las Vegas: the forgotten symbolism of architectural form

Outputs (What I want to achieve):
- Selection of „The Strip"
- Relations between street section and social activity
- Identification of the missing and essential facilities
- Exploring different street identities
- Character biographies

Legend:

Inputs:
- ·········· Theoretical Framework
- ✕ Learning From...
- ■ (High) Streets
- ▲ Anthropological | Sociological Research

Methodology ———
- ● Methods

Outputs: – – –
- ▮ What I want to achieve

10

Preliminary Conclusion

Phil Hubbard writes in his book - „There is a well-worn cliché suggesting Britain is a nation of shopkeepers."[1] Nevertheless, their culture associated with high streets is beginning to disappear and the once vibrant shops providing core services are becoming empty. However, not everywhere and not entirely. Analysing social media initially, I learned that there are still parts of the high streets visited eagerly by ethnically diverse Londoners. They use the space in many ways - partying at buzzing and less buzzing street events, eating meals together or just hanging out with friends. So it seems that the original shopping function of the high streets is no longer so important. For them, the streets are for all other things that are not shopping. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore those things that make the high streets still a relevant destination for many ethnic groups and to show that often these parts of cities, which are less desirable in the urban landscape, can function better socially than others.

1 Hubbard, The battle for the High Street, 15

figure 5 - screenshot from TikTok showing man selling drinks on a hot day on Harlesden High Street

figure 6 - screenshot from TikTok showing a night street party on Harlesden High Street

figure 7 - screenshot from Instagram showing Ratha Jatra celebrations on Croydon High Street

Annotated Bibliography

Learning from…

1. Al, Stefan. *The Strip: Las Vegas and the architecture of the American dream.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017.

In his book, Stefan Al tells the history of the transformations that have taken place on the famous Strip in Las Vegas - starting with the fascination with the wild west, through Disneyland-like buildings or those taken out of Venice and ending with structures designed by famous architects. In this way, the author shows that the changes that have taken place in Vegas actually reflect changes that have taken place in America itself and are representative of specific trends.

2. Venturi, Robert, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour. *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form.* [Rev. ed.], 7th printing. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Pr, 1985.

In the book, the authors conduct an extensive analysis of Las Vegas' main street, highlighting its diminished architectural value. They use several different research methods to do this, including photographs taken from the perspective of a person driving by, photos comparing different typologies of casinos, and numerous drawings from mapping the various activities and locations of the ground floor commercial establishment, to mapping all the words seen from the street.

3. Vinegar, Aron, and Michael J. Golec, red. *Relearning from Las Vegas.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

In this book, the authors have included a collection of ten essays on architecture, culture and philosophy, inspired by the book *Learning from Las Vegas.* Amongst other things, the authors describe information on the work of Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, as well as content on theory in architecture - with a focus on the objects explored in *Learning from Las Vegas* - ornaments, signs, billboards, kitsch and photorealism, rather than the larger urban scale.

(High) Streets

1. Carmona, Matthew. „London's Local High Streets: The Problems, Potential and Complexities of Mixed Street Corridors". *Progress inPlanning* 100 (sierpień 2015): 1–84. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.progress.2014.03.001.

In his article, Matthew Carmona examines the problems and challenges faced by UK High Streets and then focuses on specific examples in London. The author describes six case studies and analyses them to address physical, real estate, exchange, movement and management issues. In addition, Carmona examines the political context across London, from which he concludes the importance of high streets. Through such research, he can identify their impact on the shape of the city as a whole and the local community.

2. Hubbard, Phil. *The battle for the High Street: retail gentrification, class and disgust.* London, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

In his book, Phil Hubbard shows the importance of High Streets in their crisis. Once vibrant streets, now increasingly deserted and deterring new shoppers, they are still a vital part of the lives of many groups in society. The author describes the different faces of the High Streets - clubs open 24 hours a day, betting shops, numerous fast food establishments or bohemia. Furthermore, he highlights how the policies being pursued to reform high streets can hit the poorer and marginalised social groups.

Anthropological | Sociological Research

1. Hall, Edward T. *The hidden dimension.* New York: Anchor Books, 1990.

Edward T. Hall's book describes how people use and perceive space and how this affects their relationships, intercultural interactions, architecture or urban planning. He first examines the behaviour of animals by limiting their territory and observing their reactions. He then focuses on various architectural examples to show how people from different cultures experience space

differently. The author emphasises that knowledge of these mechanisms can help designers to improve urban life.

2. Lucas, Ray. *Anthropology for architects: social relations and the built environment.* 1st wyd. London ; New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020.

In his book, Ray Lucas analyses architects' choices and goals and considers how anthropologists' knowledge can help during the design process. In each chapter, the author describes a different type of space - home, museum, marketplace, routes, theatre and restaurant. Through their analysis, Lucas shows how to design more consciously and sensitively when thinking about the social life of a space.

3. Pronkhorst, Annuska, Michelle Provoost, and Wouter Vanstiphout, red. *A City of Comings and Goings.* Rotterdam: nai010 publishers, 2019.

In the book, the authors present essays on six European cities (Amsterdam, London, Prato, Vienna, Berlin and Aarhus) where the phenomenon of migration is heavily apparent and experienced. From these cities, the authors have selected and created a catalogue of one hundred

different projects operating at different scales and responding to the problems that migration entails. In this way, the book seeks to show approaches to working in city planning to enable the transformation of cities so that they become more resilient to migration.

4. Saunders, Doug. *Arrival City. How the largest migration in history is reshaping our world.* New York: Pantheon books, b.d.

This book combines reportage, sociological, economic and urban research to show the phenomenon of rural to urban labour migration. In the chapter on London, the author describes the story of people coming from Bangladesh to the English capital to improve their livelihoods. He writes how the first arriving generations sent their earned money to their families in their home country and managed to save the leftovers to set up their small restaurants. The next generations were already able to afford better education and improve their situation materially and socially and were a kind of integration machine in society. Thus, the author highlights the role of migrants as opportunists rather than as a negative aspect of cities.

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