

"THE MEANWHILE PROJECT" AGAINST HIGH STREET DECLINE

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"In the last 20 years, an estimated 88 million extra square feet of retail space has been added to high streets. Experian predict 72,000 shops will close in 2009: more than 1000 a week".(1)

Although it may sound pessimistic, what is true is that empty shops & premises has become an issue that have start to rise many concerns. Economic downturn has also required even stronger specific regeneration policy action in many cities.

Empty shops usually mean less jobs for locals, no community life, rise of crime and insecurity; and what it is worse, the persistance of this phenomenon, makes increasingly difficult for new life to emerge. As [Westminster Council's](#) cabinet member Councillor Ed Argar would say *"When shops become empty it can create a negative impact on high streets and the people that use them" (...) "This is a perfect opportunity to make the most of otherwise unused spaces and bring them back to life for the benefit of the whole community, until demand from suitable long-term business lessees for the vacant premises is found"*. (2)

In the UK those issues have arised increasing concerns about the future of once thriving high streets and communities, and have spured many initiaves across the country to try to adress those challenges. Among them, I would like to highlight the work of the [Development Trusts Association](#) and particularly, ["The Meanwhile Project"](#). Thus, *"Something is happening on the high street: Empty shops are spreading as the recession bites hard. They spoil town centres and destroy social and economic value"*. We can do nothing or: *"MEANWHILE, re-animate these spaces with temporary projects that allow local people and community groups to experiment with new projects and enterprises, relieve the burden for landlords of an empty property and support the surviving businesses on the high street by stimulating new footfall and users in the town centre"*. So, in short, we give regeneration a chance while we provide new spaces for community use among other remarkable benefits.

[Central Government \(through Communities and Local Government's Ministry\)](#) has already take action, with £5,6m for councils to tackle empty shops 'desease' at high streets. As it was announced by the Communities Secretary, [John Denham](#): *"We know that the downturn has really hurt some English high streets especially where there was already high deprivation. But, the real help we are giving now is making a difference in keeping town centres vibrant. (...) There is no need to let parts of our high streets go to waste, especially when we know that it doesn't take a lot to turn them into something useful for the community"*.

Apart from financial help, planning procedures have also been softened. Indeed, ["Local Development Orders"](#), which allows councils to grant planning permission or set local permitted development and change of use rules, will no longer need to be linked to existing development plans which will allow local planning authorities to implement LDOs with greater speed and flexibility.

Such an effort has already brought relevant outcomes to UK cities through "The Meanwhile Project" or other initiatives. An example: People's Cinema in Cambridge. The project turns empty shops into

cinema spaces and gives local students an opportunity to showcase their work while taking steps to create a buzz on the high street.

People's Cinema is part of a city-wide initiative called [Changing Spaces](#), enabling local community groups and arts organisations to find innovative ways of using vacant shop units throughout Cambridge. It is supported by the [Cambridge City Council](#) and [Love Cambridge](#), the new City Centre Partnership.

Finally, there are also organisations campaigning against empty properties, as "[The Empty Homes Agency](#)", an independent campaigning charity which exists to highlight the waste of empty property in England and works to promote solutions to bring them back into use.

Quotes:

(1), (2): [The Empty Shops Workbook](#), the [Empty Shops Network](#) and The Meanwhile Project, based on research supported by the [Revolutionary Arts Group](#), the [Artists Information Company](#) and [Worthing Regeneration](#), page 3.

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