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OPINION

Designing for street vibrancy
Angus Bruce, – HASSELL

The value of main streets is shifting. With the prevalence of online access to shopping, services and social networking, the factors that draw people to the streets are most definitely changing. It's evident that in order to remain viable, our main streets must step up and provide something more.

Increasingly, city leaders and shapers are recognising the potential for main streets to reach beyond their traditional role as vehicle-dominated connections to shopfronts and become valuable 'places' in their own right.

Through a purposeful shift in our approach to their design, main streets can be reinvigorated as unique places for people – places that drive urban vitality by stimulating community engagement, and in turn, the local economy.

The concept of the vibrant or 'curated' street is based on the understanding that contemporary society favours experiences over static transactions. As designers, we can set the stage for endless opportunities by employing flexible solutions that enable main streets to evolve, beyond a 'set piece', to operate more as adaptable platforms ripe for activation.

What makes a street vibrant?

There are a number of guidelines available about good street design with many responding to the previous decades of car-dominated urban planning, which has proven over time to impede foot traffic. The dominant theme in contemporary guides is that, in the eyes of a community, the casual and social use of the main street is what makes it appealing. Therefore, to draw pedestrians to the street, we must keep the needs and desires of people front-of-mind.

And so, local governments and planning authorities around the world are gradually reinterpreting main streets for the benefit of people – narrowing roads and widening footpaths; integrating shade, seating and lighting; replacing hot road asphalt with unit paving; and increasing street trees, garden beds and open planted drainage swales to soften, filter and cool the environment. There is also a growing trend of integrating infrastructure to support a rotation of programmed, 'plug and play' activities and events. Governments and stakeholders are working together with the various community and business user groups that share the public open space to develop a program of offerings that are authentic to the community and place – ensuring their relevance and success.

In London in particular, there's been a major focus on high street revitalisation, with the investment of over £129m since 2011 to ensure the city's high streets improve and thrive. The Croydon South End High Street project, designed by HASSELL, is one example of the city's huge investment that is now benefiting over 100 high streets.

The London Borough of Croydon wanted to re-establish their high street as a place of enterprise and community – to prioritise people over cars and rebuild a sense of civic pride. One of the biggest challenges was to find new ways to draw people to the site, encourage them to stay, and tell their friends to visit. The HASSELL design stitched together the streets, squares and open spaces of Croydon

to create welcoming, vibrant and safe public places that people wanted to be part of. Working with architects WeMadeThat, a vacant property was transformed into '*The Ideas Shop*' for community consultation, enabling a design that addressed many of the issues raised by the people that live and work in the area.

The Croydon South End High Street design was driven by the philosophy of 'a right to graze' to promote increased and more diverse uses of the high street – an environment where visitors can move easily between restaurants, shops and businesses. Work included improvements to tired shop fronts, the makeover of signage, awnings and the language of the building facades, and the removal of clutter from the street to put the heritage of local buildings back on show. New trees, seating and paving visually connected the gathering areas, and public art and bespoke graphics added colour and life to walls and windows. The road was narrowed and footpath expanded to create a more pedestrian friendly environment, and space that supports and encourages cyclists.

The result has been an overwhelming success with shop vacancies reducing from 25% to just 5% by the time the project was completed. Croydon Council received positive feedback from local businesses and residents, and a number of restaurants gained approval to offer alfresco dining – making the most of the newly enhanced outdoor space.

Clearly, good design is paramount to supporting a rich program of uses that encourage varying speeds of pedestrian activity, including those who wish to stop and linger in the street. A diversity of uses increases the diversity of users, which in turn enriches our experience of the streets and surrounding city spaces and keeps us coming back.

However, specific, reliable and comparable data on the elements of good street design is hard to come by, except in relation to the geometry of roads for safety and vehicle flow. While there are general principles to be adhered to, each street will differ in its functional requirements, place, value, climate, culture, retail offerings, demographic make-up and local economic drivers. The diverse nature of communities and the variety of physical environments makes it very difficult to quantify what makes a "vibrant street". This obstacle has inspired the HASSELL design team to conduct further research into the various aspects of successful main streets – to increase understanding and unlock the ingredients that make them work.

Croydon South End High Street. Photography by Jakob Spriestersbach.

Which streets, and why do people use them?

Main streets come in all shapes and sizes, but are often the central thoroughfare or commercial focal point of a city, suburb or town. Variations in activity, geography and character are endless, but they invariably fall into three particular types of main streets: the central pedestrianised street; the everyday shopping high street, and the dining destination "eat street".

While these three categories are not mutually exclusive – many streets have overlapping characteristics – they provide a strong comparative basis for understanding the dynamics and spatial qualities that combine to create a truly vibrant street, including:

_Pedestrian Street - A central fixture, physically and figuratively, in many cities, where national and international retail chains and department stores cluster, buskers gather to try their luck, and tourists and local pedestrians are free to roam without road traffic around them.

_High Street – Providing the functional everyday services and shops that local communities need – the post office, dry cleaner, supermarket, gift shops and optometrists; often supplemented by some dining and fashion retail options.

_Eat Street – As incomes rise, and working hours lengthen, people increasingly eat out. Often these dining destinations are founded on immigrant communities that provide authentic food experiences. Other times it is simply a matter of a handful of good quality restaurants that attract more patrons and more businesses until the location becomes a dining cluster.

HASSELL research revealed a series of indicators deemed necessary for the design of streets that are exceptional urban spaces. This research included the measuring, collating and analysis of streets, including their physical dimensions, shop use, local population density data, walk-scores, landscape amenity and seating elements, and access to transport – all aimed at helping to build knowledge and discussion around the influencers that drive vibrancy and the key indicators necessary for good design.

Nine vibrant main streets in Australia and the United Kingdom were researched and explored first-hand to see and feel how design interventions influence the way people experience these streets. The research streets were:

_Brick Lane and Camden High St – London, UK

_The Parade, Norwood; Rundle St and Rundle Mall – Adelaide, Australia

_Chapel St, Prahran; Thomas St Dandenong; Hopkins St, Footscray; and Bourke St Mall – Melbourne, Australia

**Density, demand and diversity help a main street thrive**

The HASSELL research found that while socio-economic factors have the potential to negatively affect the vibrancy of an area, it is important to note that not all vibrant main streets are in high socio-economic areas, and not all wealthy locations have high-functioning vibrant streets.

The vibrancy of a street is dependent on matching the products and services that are offered to the needs of the community, local or otherwise, that it serves; as well as a number of external factors including social trends, economic conditions and local demographics. Therefore, of primary importance in the renewal of a street is the mix of activity contained within its buildings and spaces.

The HASSELL analysis of the sourced data also explored the shop use in each of the streets, and in each of the three types of street. The research defined the percentage of each shop use within the three street types, and a very clear pattern emerged in respect of the balance of property frontage use according to each category, with the amount of retail descending in the progression from city pedestrian street, to high street, to eat street.
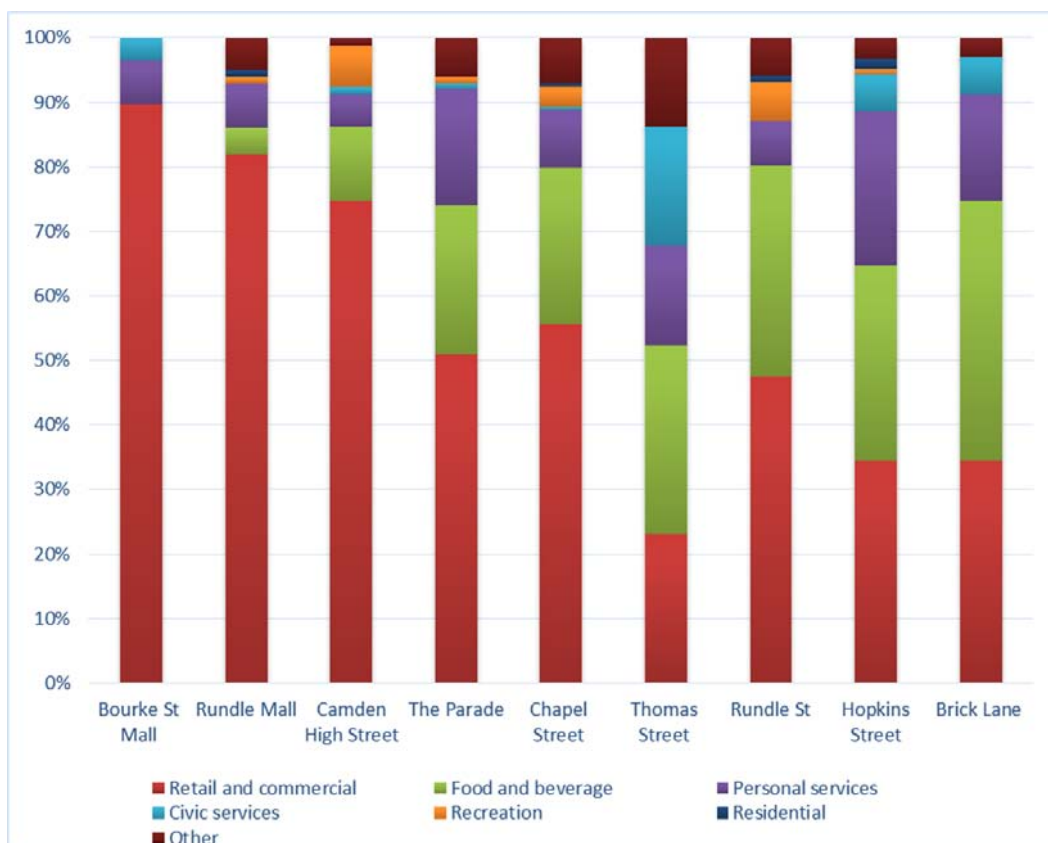
Percentage of shop use to street type. Source: HASSELL.
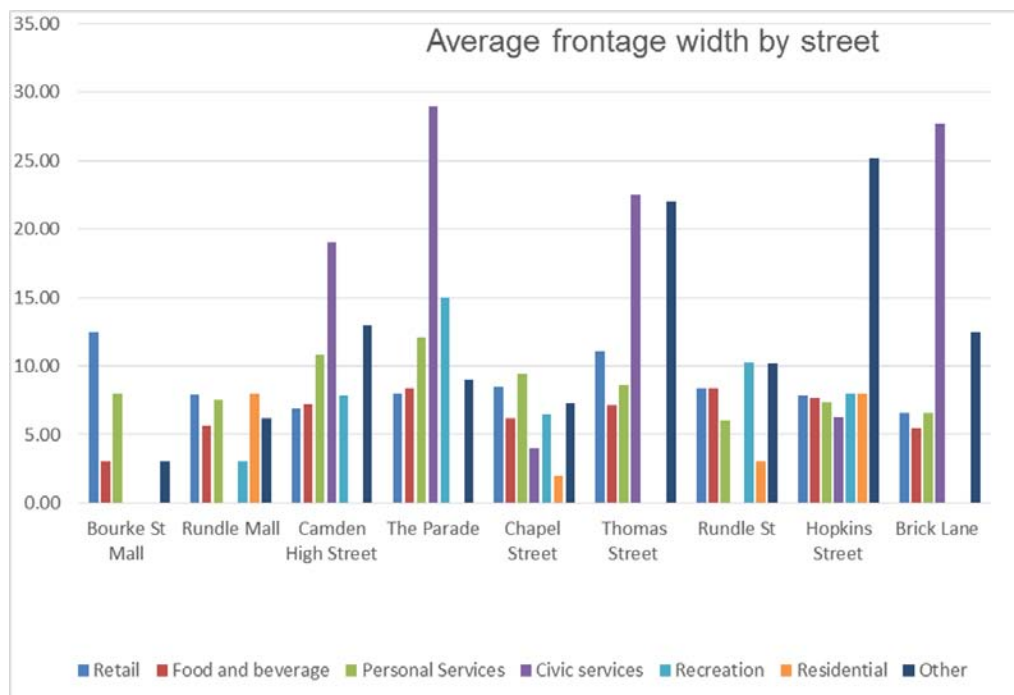
Average frontage width by street type. Source: HASSELL.
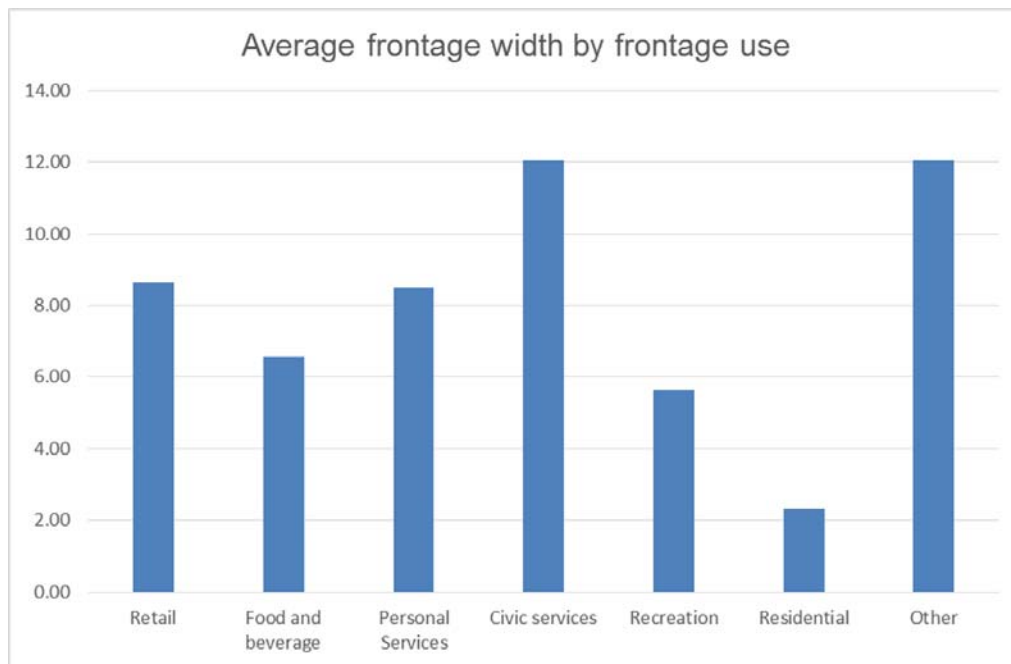
Average frontage width by building use. Source: HASSELL.

With the exception of residential frontages, which are generally limited to entrances and doorways, average food and beverage, and retail frontages are generally narrower than the other categories. Therefore, the research concluded that small businesses flourish in small premises, due to lower overheads, more attractive premises, less space wasted, and higher density – which helps create a critical mass. Importantly though, evidence on-site showed that critical mass for main street vibrancy can also be built through key curated open space interventions.

Curating great experiences to draw people to the street

A recent example of the curated design approach is the Rundle Mall Redevelopment in Adelaide. HASSELL and Arup led a collaborative design process working closely with Council and retail traders, to reposition Adelaide's historic retail district – comprising over 700 retail stores, 350 commercial businesses, three department stores and 15 arcades connected by 10,000 sqm of open public space – as captivating civic space for the city's people to come together.

The project vision was to reveal and recast the cities central pedestrian street as an evolving, urban environment for connection and exchange – to build economy and to attract a broader cross section of visitors and encourage them to stay longer. To sustain engagement, the pedestrian street needed to be agile and adaptable over time and space. Therefore, the design employed flexible solutions, such as 'plug and play' infrastructure, creating an adaptable platform for activation. Through a collective commitment to the curation of events and offerings, Rundle Mall has transformed into a socially active place that amplifies the experiential to support the transactional. This approach is a sustainable response to the fast-changing nature of contemporary society. It addresses emerging experience-based consumer trends, creates more space and value for the public; and employs short, medium and long-term strategies that anticipate change and inspire innovation.

Removing the dated, superfluous structures from the streets central spine has opened up the space to redefine its character and use. Timber platforms provide popular gathering places at the entrances, and the doubling of trees throughout has increased shade and comfort, while framing views of

heritage buildings. A new catenary lighting system illuminates the space at night, with the central focus of the mall at the Gawler Place junction highlighted by a beautifully lit canopy – setting the stage for productions and events.

Rundle Mall has become a place that drives urban vitality – promoting its success and viability into the future. The careful curation of pop-ups by the Rundle Mall Management Authority, Council and other event organisers, ensures the environment is continually changing over the days, weeks and seasons. Since completion, the space has hosted outdoor cinema and fashion events, music performances and much more. But, it's not all about commerce – the central promenade has also become a route for public parades and demonstrations.

Rundle Mall Redevelopment

More widely, art, interpretation and programming have been used to playfully engage passers-by and draw them into, and through the street. By introducing public spectacles and establishing flexible, event-based destinations that support temporary pop-up vendors and installations; the new pedestrianised city street delivers an unexpected and evolving urban landscape for people to discover – and keep them coming back. One-off temporary interventions are also being used to test the validity and demand for a more permanent design intervention in underused, or fading adjacent streets.

Using research to take the guesswork out of designing vibrant streets

Considering the quantitative research data and on-the-ground testing, it is evident that as designers we can play a vital role in securing the future of our main streets – using both permanent and temporary interventions to encourage greater street life and identity.

We can set the stage for exciting new opportunities that keep people returning to our streets, by designing flexible solutions that enable our streets to evolve through dynamic programming. Sustained activation, however, relies on the effective integration of continued testing, planning, design development, innovation, management and monitoring.

The key to maximising these opportunities is a commitment from all stakeholders – planners, designers, government, business and the broader community – to collectively promote vibrancy, and the ongoing success and viability of our streets as places for people.

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