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Bristol Civic Society response to East Street vision consultation

The Society welcomes the opportunity to throw its thoughts into the pool of thinking which will evolve into a masterplan. From both the Purcell May 2019 report and our own assessment, some pointers for improvement emerge, but not yet a coherent vision.

Context

Spatially

- East Street is a long, narrow street. The only exceptions are offshoots at either end – to St Catherine's Place and Dean Street.
- To the south-east of East Street, there is a vast strip of land dominated by single-storey warehouse and storage sites.
- Pending the Bedminster Green development, there is probably little pedestrian movement orthogonal to East Street ?
- The Asda supermarket on Bedminster Parade is a centre of gravity to the north-east, and boosts the footfall for shops on Bedminster Parade.
- East Street is not far from North Street, another major neighbourhood shopping centre.

The offer

- East Street contains a number of significant shops and outlets, but lacks an 'anchor' store. Wilkinsons replaced a former 1980s Tesco outlet as the largest retail offer. In the 2000s, it has lost financial services outlets and gained pawnbrokers and betting shops.
- East Street is not currently thriving (as evidenced by the Purcell report)
- East Street does not have a strong identity or image
- There are few community focal points in the street.

The street environment

- The buildings are predominantly two storeys high, and none more than three storeys. This adds to the sense of spaciousness and light and a positive feature of the street.
- There are some attractive individual buildings and groups of buildings, but the street exudes some neglect.
- The street is not lively in the evening when all the shops are shuttered up, except for a few pubs etc

Future changes

- The Bedminster Green developments will, if built, bring in a massive influx of nearby residents.
- Longer-term, a further increase in nearby residents could come in the Bedminster Green 2 area towards Temple Meads.
- High street retail is under threat, probably more so because of COVID infection concerns. If post-COVID a proportion of the shops in the street do not reopen, that will have an impact on what might be proposed

The development project

- The consultation does not describe the scope of the project that is proposed, nor on what funding or budget or timescale, but perhaps the masterplan will start to define what is required.

Regeneration principles

Too many shops: East Street clearly provides an important local retail function. However, it feels like a centre with too many shops - difficult to assess how many shops are closed due to Covid or to longer term reasons. It has not adapted to the fundamental change caused by the departure of Wills tobacco factories to Hartcliffe in the early 1970s.

Regeneration from nearby development - slowly: Sensible and sensitive redevelopment of the Bedminster Green sites is probably necessary to achieve lasting improvement, bringing additional potential shoppers to the area. All this will take many years. It has taken a generation to get to this state after Imperial Tobacco left.

Organic redevelopment: We do not expect a large investment in a fundamental transformation of the area, rather we think the area will change organically, over a period of time, as small developers get involved and do things piecemeal. When permission for the large residential development is granted on the major plots adjacent. this will encourage the need for new shops and retail outlets, but also doctors, dentists and other community necessities.

Short-term temporary uses: During the period of transition there will be retail units which are vacant and which will remain so for the foreseeable future - would it be possible to explore temporary uses ? Occupation by artists on a short-term basis? This would bring an uplift in visual appearance and additional activity to the street. There will be other ideas for temporary activity. Almost anything better than shuttered premises.

Street activity: If the road width is narrowed and the pavement is widened, there would be more scope for a street market. If Corn Street is to grow its market, then East Street would be an ideal supplement - Bristol is short of markets.

Cleaning up: In the immediate short term, East Street would benefit from some "housekeeping" - cleaning up of litter and graffiti in the side alleys and streets.

Building improvement and redevelopment

Organic improvement: it would be good to encourage owners of neighbouring buildings to work together improving their appearance. That could also apply to the floorspace above ground floor level to try to create a better residential environment.

Combine narrow deep-plan units: the Purcell report's proposal to explore opportunities to combine narrow deep-plan units at ground floor to produce wider, more active frontages sounds sensible. If shops disappear, they might work as workspace associated with residential above.

Redevelopment: If suitable improvement cannot be encouraged, perhaps some limited development of blocks of units with upward extension should be allowed to enable financial viability. Any redevelopment should be limited to three or four storeys to avoid a canyon in East Street.

Building fabric

Current condition:

- Architecturally it is mixed - some buildings have real character, which is recognised by East Street being in the Bedminster Conservation Area. There are also some more modern buildings that might be improved if attended to.
- The buildings on the south side of the street from Dalby Avenue to Mill Lane appear in particularly poor shape. Similarly the buildings on the north side from Dalby Avenue to Warden Road.
- There are very few distinctive or attractive shop fronts although the width, scale and flow of the street offers considerable potential - with a reasonable number of attractive Victorian buildings.

Repair of building frontages: Conservation quality maintenance and repair of many of the building frontages should be carried out. This would include correctly restored edges to and demarcations between building elements. This will go some way towards reducing the current visual cacophony. A conservation builder could be brought in to work in this way on successive frontages, thereby managing costs and quality to the best effect.

Shop fascias: management of the size of shop fascias will be a significant improvement. Fascias are too frequently oversized, their tops too often corresponding with the top of the first storey window sill over which is flashed over them. Some exceed one metre in height. They should be not greater than say 0.6m from top to bottom and should stop inside a margin from each end, often a scrolled bracket having been provided in that position by the original builder.

Walking and buses etc

The pros and cons of buses: there have in the past been proposals to remove buses from East Street, but each time it is raised, the consensus is that making it easy to get there is critical, so the buses should stay. And now there is a new Metrobus stop in the street. But the presence of buses compromises the feel of the street for the pedestrian, and it has led to the bollards that just perpetuate the feel of a normal street division between vehicle space and pedestrian space. Moreover, many of the passengers on the buses on East Street will be passing through, not shopping at East Street.

Improving the experience for the pedestrian: It seems unlikely that the community will agree to removing buses, but it is important to do something to improve the experience for the pedestrian. At the very least, road space should be reallocated to make a wider 'pavement' for the pedestrian.

The street is designated a 'pedestrian zone' but the roadway does not feel safe and pedestrians do not generally walk in it. The buses are quite frequent, and there is a frequent trickle of other vehicles ignoring the ban. Vehicles pass through too fast. The traffic is not calmed. If it is to be a genuinely pedestrian street, the frequency of vehicles must be reduced to make it safe for pedestrians to walk in the middle of the road. ANPR cameras are needed to enforce vehicle restrictions

Bristol Walking Alliance response: we endorse the BWA response, which comments in more detail on the walking environment.