

Only way is up for high streets



Retail detail Val Bagnall

Disruption often has a negative connotation, but it can have a positive impact. The likes of Airbnb and Uber have revolutionised the habits and psyche of the consumer. Last month, when Uber set out its vision of urban transportation – flying taxis carrying customers from rooftop to rooftop – it confirmed that the UK's high streets must seriously consider looking up.

The decay of our high streets is well documented – a stuttering economy and acute spike in online retail have affected footfall and dramatically altered consumer spending patterns.

Spaces above shops, once used for stock and administration, have become obsolete and are consequently haemorrhaging capital value. In their bid for survival, retailers are facing the challenge of repurposing assets. So what is the solution?

Airspace – unused space above

residential, commercial and public buildings that can accommodate additional units – could help reshape the high street and revive the evolving retail sector.

Until recently, town centres and high streets had very little recreational space as the focus was on traditional retail. But as we move from shopping as a necessity to shopping as an experience, airspace developments could help repurpose existing space.

Airspace above shops could accommodate increasingly popular 'competitive socialising' concepts such as crazy golf, trampoline parks and climbing walls, as well as bars and restaurants with skyline views.

Unused retail spaces could be used to store and distribute goods for online retailers. With a shortage of industrial space, retail units in well-populated areas could provide excellent last-mile logistics space to ensure fast deliveries via drones. Given Uber's futuristic stance on travel, unused retail assets could become transport hubs and support the way we access high streets that have become experiential hubs.

The high street has traditionally been the main artery running through a community, and community centres play a key role

in fostering a sense of belonging among local residents.

Traditionally, these centres have been at street level near small urban parks, cafés and

libraries, but the thinking about their location is changing. Could rooftop community centres and outdoor recreational space be equally effective? Applying the concept to the roof while still providing

wheelchair access could make these facilities diverse and more secure, ensuring they are used properly by those who need them most.

With the UK facing a severe housing shortage, creating homes on top of shops should also be a focus. A recent study found that more than 25,000 homes could be accommodated atop commercial and retail property in central London alone. Homeowners look for a good location, amenities and connectivity. High streets generally meet all these criteria. And as high streets become destinations, they will meet the needs of those living there and create micro-communities.

Building up does not automatically mean creating monstrous skyscrapers and it certainly does not mean the end of the high street. With a sensible approach that serves the local community, airspace development could have a dramatic impact on our fledgling high streets – bringing value to property owners and curating experiences that bring consumers back time and time again.

Val Bagnall is managing director of Apex Airspace
>> See airspace feature, p26

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Airspace could help reshape the high street and revive the evolving retail sector
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Beauty is back in housebuilding



Home truths Dean Clifford

This summer, there has been a wave of initiatives to put beauty back into housebuilding. First, we had news of the first-ever national housing design audit to assess the quality and sustainability of large-scale developments. Then we had the 14-point action plan on housing from the Prince's Foundation. Most

recently was the interim report of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, with a range of proposals to make beauty a priority in the planning system.

What unites the last two is a call for more traditional-style housing, which is widely seen as more popular – and better looking. By being typically more dense than

sprawling new housing estates, some traditional styles can also help relieve housing pressures in cities such as London. So this renewed emphasis on the aesthetics of buildings, rather than just functionality, should be welcomed, if with caveats.

First, we must recognise that each area requires housing design particular to its needs, surroundings and established vernacular. What works for the Cotswolds, for example, may not work in the capital. One answer is to strengthen planning departments and provide them with the necessary resources,

as the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission suggests.

However, the ways that greater attractiveness will assist with greater delivery of homes is unclear. Few deny Britain is in the middle of a housing crisis, but greater certainty in the planning process must be at the centre of any solution.

We are definitely pleased to see a greater emphasis on good design and placemaking. Far too many residential projects feel as if they could have been built anywhere. There is a broader structural issue at play here,

Changing perceptions of industry



Social services
Helen Gordon

A recent perception audit commissioned by the BPF provides a hard-hitting reality about how our industry is regarded. The headline findings indicate that there is little recognition of property's wider contribution including the social value that we add as an industry.

While disappointing, the survey also shows that there are many respondents who are neither favourable nor unfavourable towards the property industry.

These findings provide a huge opportunity to both educate and improve the understanding of the contribution the property industry makes to society, something the BPF will focus on over the next three years.

The challenge is two-fold: we need to find engaging ways to better demonstrate what we are already doing as an

industry, while doing more and doing it better.

The real estate industry should be at the heart of building our country's future, with great workplaces, homes, retail and leisure facilities and environments that support happier, healthier communities.

On the back of the audit, the BPF has identified four key areas of focus that will help to redefine the way real estate is perceived: contributing to a productive economy; nurturing and developing a diverse workforce; reinvigorating and strengthening our communities; and safeguarding our environment.

This naturally aligns with the aspirations of the BTR sector, where building communities through the provision of quality, accessible, secure housing lies at the heart of what we are doing.

Supporting productivity in



a country that may find itself isolated and contributing to local communities to improve trust between business, communities and the government is vital.

On nurturing a diverse workforce, all developers and operators need to better align their workforce with their customer base, something Grainger is certainly pushing for.

By investing for the long term in the delivery of thousands of new high-quality rental homes aimed at the mid-market, we are helping to ease the severe housing shortage in the UK, which makes our core purpose socially compelling.

BTR addresses one of the key social concerns with renting - the opportunity to build relationships

with neighbours and establish a sense of community.

Finally, safeguarding our environment is integral to the BTR model. Assets built specifically to rent are designed to operate as rental assets efficiently for the long term.

The more the BTR sector evolves in the UK with more developments launching, the better people will understand the model and the benefits it brings. Until then, we need to try to find ways to accelerate the understanding of BTR and the positive impact it can have to support the perception of the whole property industry.

Helen Gordon is president of the BPF and chief executive of Grainger

too. Research institute Create Streets, whose founding director is also chair of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, recommends earlier consultation between the public and designers.

Buyers of tomorrow

At the moment, it is too often the same individuals who get involved, with most residents too busy to participate. This means outcomes can be skewed to the needs of a minority.

Ultimately, we must remember who we are building for - not just the buyers of today but also of tomorrow. While the mansion blocks, terraced houses and thatched cottages of yesteryear have an enduring appeal, this needs

to be balanced against the needs of our rapidly changing society.

Some Building Better, Building Beautiful proposals, such as calling out 'ugly' developments, also risk stifling innovative design. Others, such as greater community participation, need thinking through in greater detail otherwise they will just empower Nimbys.

Yet many recommendations, such as simplifying the planning process to allow a greater range of entrants and better masterplanning, make perfect sense. There is also pent-up demand for traditional-style housing, as evident in the heritage premium on many older properties.

At Great Marlborough Estates, we have been pushing for higher design standards for some time.

Our recent projects include the restoration of John Nash's Regent's Crescent, by Regent's Park in London, and the redevelopment of a grade II-listed building in Fitzrovia into new apartments.

Beauty should not be a luxury - ambitious local authorities such as Camden are building high-quality council homes.

More beautiful housing will benefit everybody. Home is where the heart is, after all.

Dean Clifford is co-founder of Great Marlborough Estates

For full details on the event and how to book go to www.resiconf.com

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