



CUNDALL Ryder

Economic Benefits of the Reallocation of Street Space

Urban design and transportation working together to save the high street

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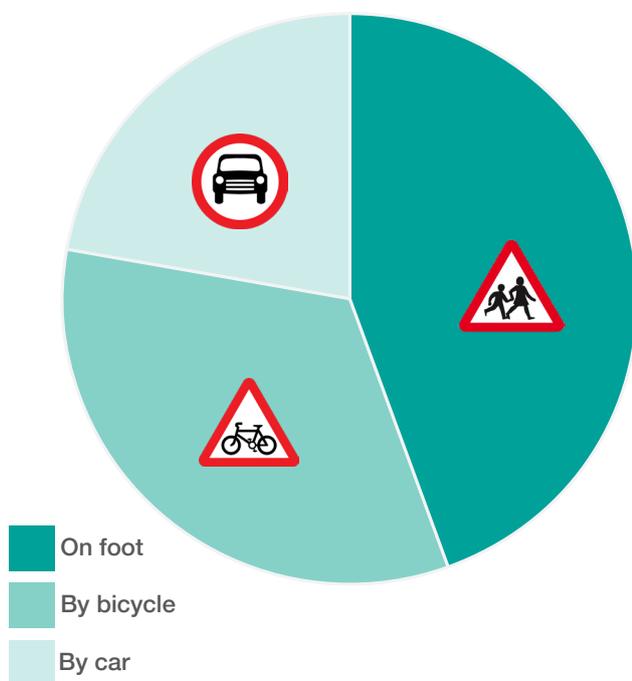
For many years successive governments have purported to have active travel and public transport at the centre of their transportation policies. These policies sought to generate environmental benefits but were also aimed to help revive local high streets, leisure opportunities and in general create an improved, vibrant community atmosphere. Many of these policies have led to significant investment in public realm schemes but this still lags far behind the investment spent on supporting the needs of vehicles.

The Covid-19 crisis has now led to many governments around the globe actually supporting their policies with increased funding for active travel and regeneration strategies including reallocating road space away from the private vehicle and creating open areas to ensure social distancing can happen. This presents an opportunity for the urban design and transportation industry to embed the current thinking within the urban environment. However, the business and commercial case for investing in active travel and public realm remains an area of contention with local businesses and the general public who view many of the changes as leading to the death of a local area.

This article acknowledges that the environmental benefits of urban realm improvements are well known and instead examines the economic benefits that these changes can bring.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on our lives and has had made us think twice about the way we travel and even if there is a need to travel. Several governments worldwide have sought to dissuade anything other than essential travel which has had a negative impact on the local economy.

Mobility is a key part of healthy placemaking, and active travel can bring major economic, health and environmental benefits. Local authorities across the globe including; Manchester, Vancouver, Milan, London, Glasgow, Leicester, York and Brighton and national governments are now seeking to implement a mix of temporary and permanent measures aimed at promoting social distancing, whilst at the same time accommodating an increased number of pedestrians and cyclists.



Shoppers accessing the town centre on foot or by bicycle do so more frequently than those accessing the centre by car
Transport for London (TfL), 2014

On 9 May the UK Government announced a £2bn package to create a ‘new era for cycling and walking’ to be followed up with a Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy to be published in the summer.¹

On the same day statutory guidance was published to encourage local authorities to reallocate road space although this is to be reviewed after three months. The question is, why shouldn’t these measures be introduced on a permanent basis?



Cycle parking can generate up to five times the retail spend for the same area of car parking
Raje and Saffrey, 2016

Whilst much of the focus has, to date, been on the easily measurable metrics of improvements in air quality and reductions in congestion, there is also an economic benefit. This needs to be highlighted further as it is the area of greatest interest to those directly impacted eg high street retailers, pubs, restaurants. This article will demonstrate that unfettered access for the private vehicle is not necessary for the economic success of an area.

Where were we before Covid-19?

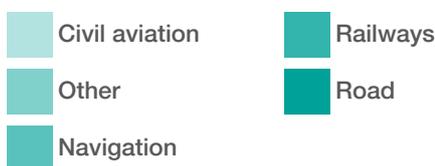
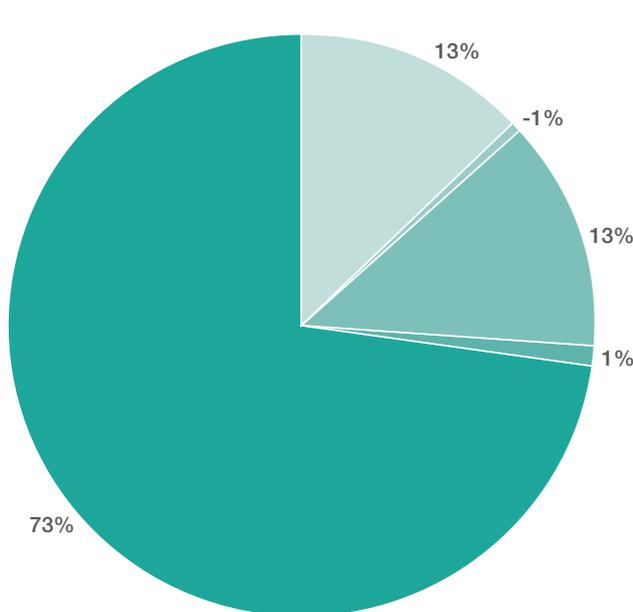
Cities and town centres were living with the legacy of successive governments which prioritised spending on highway infrastructure and space for the private vehicle, including car parking. As a result, the greatest proportion of trips were made by car and the general public therefore used private vehicles as their mode of choice in most situations. Whilst public transport was used to access and travel within our cities, less than 20 percent walked or cycled for anything other than very short trips, and a large proportion of travellers rarely thought about the need to travel or the mode we would choose.²

Although at the start of lockdown we saw a 90 percent drop in car use, congestion is expected to exceed pre lockdown levels as restrictions are eased.

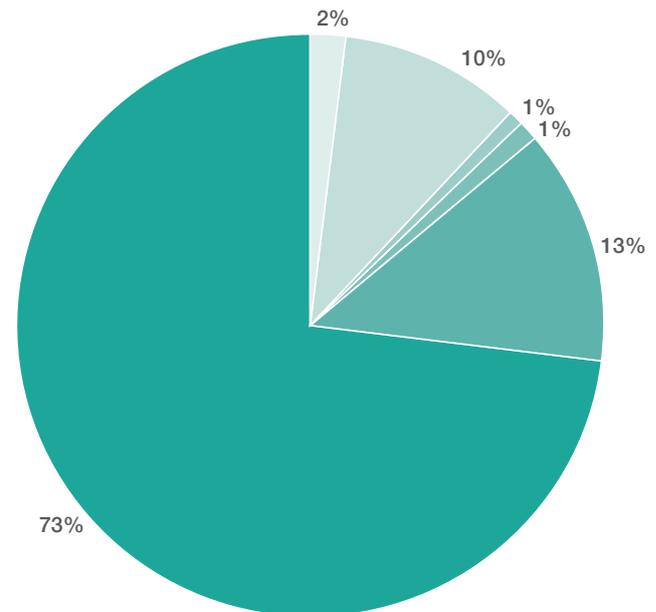
Also concerning is that retailers such as Next prioritised opening larger out of town stores in retail parks before high street branches³, as their bigger size makes them easier to adapt to social distancing requirements with large car parks and outside spaces facilitating the management of queues. If this trend continues it will encourage more people to drive to out of town retail parks, rather than walking to local shops, and is a concerning trend for high streets and businesses who now need to encourage more people than ever to visit the high street by providing an attractive environment to shop.

We need to clearly demonstrate to retailers and businesses the economic benefits of walking and cycling which have a direct impact on their livelihoods, alongside the perhaps less tangible health and environmental benefits.

2008 travel mode



2018 travel mode



Economic benefits of active travel schemes

Whilst there is well established evidence demonstrating that investment in walking, cycling and public realm improvements increases the economic performance of an area, it is less well known and accepted by the general public and retailers, who often see access for the private vehicle being the key to an area's economic success.

The Pedestrian Pound report⁴ identified three key performance indicators:

- Impact on existing business performance (footfall and retail)
- Urban regeneration (new business, rental income, employment, social inclusion)
- Improved consumer and business perceptions

The study found that all were improved because of enhanced public realm, and concluded that:

- Walking and cycling projects can increase retail sales by 30 percent or more. If more space is given for walking and cycling and less to cars, the absence of customers arriving by car is more than compensated by people arriving on foot or by bike
- Good urban design and quality green spaces can increase property prices and rents by up to 20 percent
- Walking projects increase land values by up to 30 percent



This evidence suggests that the current rush towards electrification of vehicles and infrastructure may not be the way forward for the economic wellbeing of a local area and that we need a mix of solutions to maintain non direct access for private vehicles, whilst also increasing funding for active travel improvements to generate the indirect benefits provided by cycling and walking.

These benefits also do not factor in the economic costs of urban congestion, road casualties, air pollution and physical inactivity. Promoting active travel is a highly cost effective solution to all these issues, with the average cost-to-benefit ratio for cycling and walking schemes far higher than most private vehicle based infrastructure schemes.

Copenhagen is an excellent example of the sustained economic benefits of a shift towards walking and cycling culture. Post war, Copenhagen, like many other European cities was progressing towards an American car centric model. The 1973 oil crisis forced the city to rethink its transport strategy. Car free Sundays were introduced and instead of investing in highways infrastructure, the city retained its historic buildings, streets and public spaces, enabling the blossoming of a strong cycling culture.

Forty one percent of all trips to work and study to / from Copenhagen is by bike, and it is now one of world’s most liveable cities.

The economic benefits have been huge: Copenhagen estimates that with 1.4m km cycled every day, that’s an economic gain to the city of up to £1.5m daily, and 32 percent of all high street and supermarket spending comes from people who have travelled to the shops via bike, increasing in areas that have invested in cycle friendly infrastructure.

As demonstrated in the following table, there is significant evidence from around the world which shows that the impact of active travel measure promotion and well designed, inclusive public realm schemes can have a positive outcome for an area.

Scheme	Intervention	Benefit
Altrincham	Public realm improvements	Footfall Increased by 22% and reduced retail vacancy of 22% ⁵
Kensington High Street	Re design of the street environment, including new crossings, changed road alignments, cycle parking, footway widening and re paving, and new street trees	7% increase in pedestrians and 30% increase in cyclists and accident reduction ⁶
Coventry Pedestrianisation	New Civic Square, rationalisation of street furniture	25% increase on footfall on Saturdays ⁷
Kelso	Public realm improvements and street furniture rationalisation	28% increase in footfall ⁸
Sheffield Peace Gardens	New open space and public realm	35% increase in shopping visits and net increase in spending of £4.2m ⁹
Bangkok	Pedestrianisation	44% of retailers report increase in sale, 33% no change and 23% reduction – so net positive gain ¹⁰
New York	Pedestrian Intersection improvement	48% increase in local sales ¹¹
Brussels (2015)	Car free zone	85% of local shopkeepers and 80% of visitors from abroad are in favour of the improvements ¹²

Opportunities for local economies

Reallocation of space

The reduction in traffic due to Covid-19 has resulted in the sudden creation of space and this should be used to support continued social distancing and supporting businesses by providing additional outdoor space to improve an area's public realm. This can be aided by the removal of non essential parking and road space, supported through a reduction in demand.



The evidence clearly shows that reallocating space and prioritising active modes has economic benefits and can provide a better space for people to live, work and shop in. Previously external 'in between' space might have been a 'nice to have', used for open store frontages with racks to entice shoppers in or attractive outdoor seating areas for cafés; now this is critical for businesses' survival and the public's safety.

More flexible space of this nature delivered through urban realm improvements can also support growth in the evening and night time economy, not just in terms of outside seating areas for pubs, bars and restaurants, but also – in the post Covid-19 future – events and gatherings.

We should also think about futureproofing urban areas by creating flexible space in new developments which can be used in the meantime eg for markets, pop up uses, but may be reclaimed if, for instance, cycling levels increase or space is required for a future sustainable mode – or, as we now know, for social distancing in future pandemics.





High streets

High streets have been under pressure for many years.^{13,14} In 2018, high street vacancy rates were 11.1 percent in England, 11.9 percent in Scotland and 14.5 percent in Wales. During the Covid-19 pandemic, figures from April indicate that there was a decline of unprecedented magnitude as the number of people at retail sites dropped by a colossal 80 percent.

In recent years the way we shop and our expectations of the high street have changed dramatically. The impact of Covid-19 is likely to expediate this shift so that habits such as online purchases and fewer physical interactions will become the norm and the high street will need to offer something different. Additionally, the change in future working habits with more home, remote and flexible working essentially creating decentralised 'digital villages' will provide a challenge to the urban environment.

People will be looking for a quality experience to attract them into city and town centres with a mixed use trip of leisure, business and shopping becoming the differentiator. Businesses need the 'hook' to bring people in. Providing an outdoor area where people feel safe and not threatened by excessive tarmac, fast moving vehicles or even parked vehicles acting as barriers, will be a key to the survival of an urban area.

Access to town centres

The quality of the walking environment is a huge factor in influencing people's shopping choices, and people who walk to their high street have been shown to spend more, and in a wider range of shops, than visitors arriving by car, bus or bike. Attractive features such as planting, waterways and pocket parks along the route to the high street or town centre can help make walking and cycling a pleasant alternative to driving. Green spaces and play spaces can also provide further reason for people to visit their town centre, as well as encouraging them to stay longer when they do.¹⁵



However, with the potential collapse of public transport usage we need to maintain the ability to access high streets with their improved urban realm. Mobility as a Service, e-scooters, e-bikes and suitable edge of centre parking can help an urban area's accessibility, and we need to ensure that these are in place to help persuade people back to the high streets. Providing this entire system allows access to those who need to drive to access an area whilst also removing the direct impacts of the private vehicle which is highly inefficient in terms of space.



These 'pit stops', whether park and ride or 'mobility hubs', could include green space and community facilities and can have an economic / regeneration impact of their own. With the challenges high streets are facing, and their diversification to an experience based economy, is there also an opportunity for mobility hubs to help reinvent them by repurposing vacant units?

Hyper locality

Another effect of the recent lockdown restrictions is hyper locality, which sees more people relying more heavily on local supply chains and communities. This ties in with the sustainable design principle of a '20 minute neighbourhood', which should be at the forefront of future urban planning decisions.

Recent studies, including the Pedestrian Pound, have found that within the UK, 87 percent of consumers live within a five mile radius of their nearest high street and 38 percent visit several times a week for small 'top up' or leisure trips.¹⁶

These trips are easily facilitated by active travel and Covid is again bringing this into focus as increased space will create safe and attractive locations where people of all ages and abilities feel comfortable walking and cycling, and wish to spend time. This opens up economic opportunities as dwell time increases, casual browsing is made easier, there are fewer barriers, eg vehicles and parking, in place to prevent a change of direction to visit a shop / cafe and average stay increases. It is also good business sense to catering to a wider range of people whilst also retaining your existing customer base.

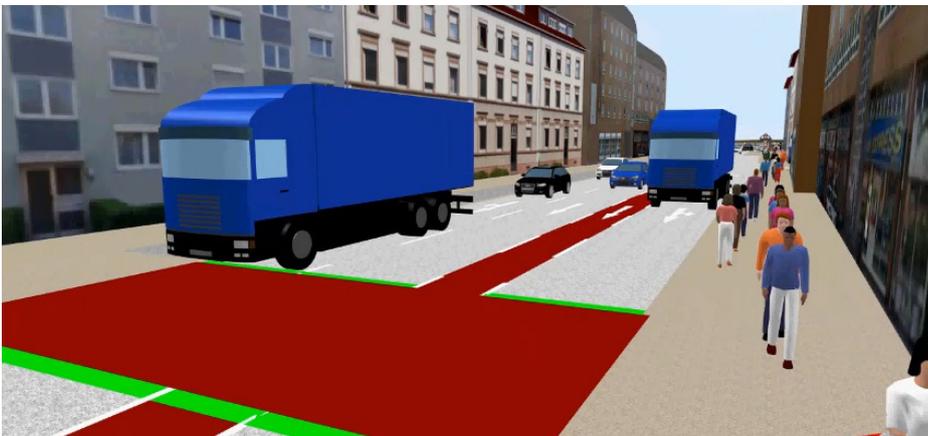
Delivering schemes supporting the theories

Cundall and Ryder have been reviewing the potential to reallocate road space in relation to the impact on traffic flows and the associated benefits to the urban environment, demonstrated on two recent schemes, **Morrison Street Multi Modal Study, Edinburgh**, and **reallocation of road space at Grey Street, Newcastle upon Tyne**.

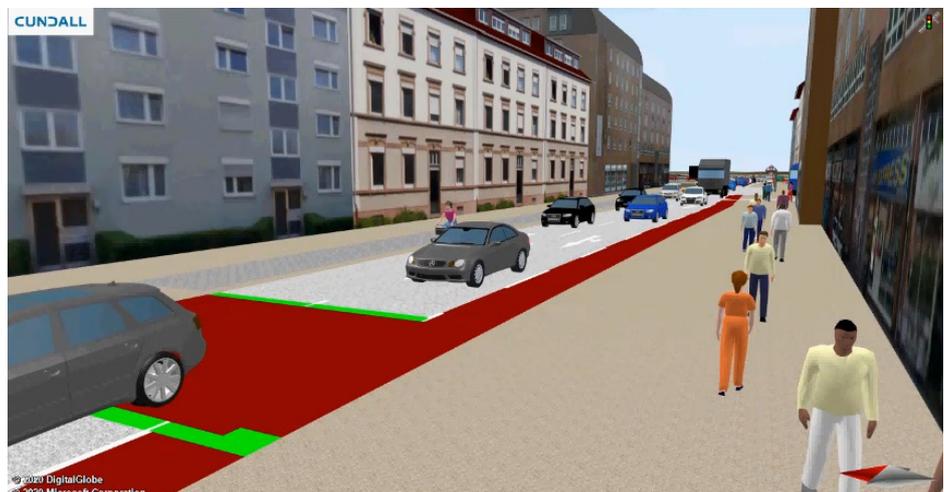
Cundall has analysed the principle of reallocating space on Morrison Street in Edinburgh using microsimulation modelling, to review the potential to enhance the public realm and support businesses on the street through the provision of additional external space to support social distancing as businesses re open.

This modelling has indicated that even with the removal of a lane, vehicle through movements have only been marginally impacted, whilst the attractiveness for pedestrians and cyclists has led to more users being enticed to an area and spending more time in the enhanced urban environment.

There is further opportunity to reallocate space associated with existing on street parking, in addition to rationalising loading bays to ensure that the space is used in the most efficient manner possible, thereby benefiting all users of the street.



Morrison Street, existing¹⁷



Morrison Street, proposed¹⁸

This type of analysis can then be used to inform the design of public realm schemes to facilitate walking and cycling in a similar manner to that currently being promoted in Newcastle.

Ryder has been supporting Newcastle City Council's design changes to Grey Street to enable people to travel easily, whilst maintaining social distance, and to meet the increasing demand for space to walk and cycle.

This will support the many businesses lining this street, for example cafés, restaurants, bars and shops which will require additional external space to enable customers to access their services safely.

The scheme will see the removal of the majority of on street parking and the creation of wider pavements, a new cycle lane and planting. This will enable people to walk, cycle and queue outside of shops with adequate space to pass, while providing external space for businesses to use.

Cundall and Ryder are working to deliver urban realm improvements to benefit local businesses, retaining necessary access for private and service vehicles and public transport, whilst increasing accessibility for walking and cycling.



Grey Street, existing¹⁹



Grey Street, proposed²⁰

Summary

The current pandemic has forced us to review our travel habits and it is unclear how long certain restrictions will remain in place. This has the potential to support the reallocation of road space away from the car on a permanent basis and provide an enhanced urban environment, which has been proven to benefit local economies.

The UK Government advise that there will need to be a phased approach to relaxing current restrictions, and it is considered that a joined up approach from urban designers, transport planners and local officers can help support this in addition to generating long term benefits, and we at Ryder and Cundall are actively involved in making this a reality.

However, this needs the will of politicians and local authority officers to support businesses' return to profitability. Monitoring the economic impact of these improvements will also provide an evidence base for future interventions.

We would love to hear from you if you are interested in collaborating.



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