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Dialogue & Redesign: How Business is Booming Again on Leyton's High Streets

By **Karl Dickinson** September 29, 2025 0 14

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Karl Dickinson

Change matters. It takes courage. As a writer - and citizen - I am inspired by stories of those who challenge the 'we've always done it this way' attitude. We can do better - it's time to listen to those who go against the grain.

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It took just months to spruce up High Road Leyton, once again filling what was a declining town centre with businesses, people, and pride.

London's atmosphere was electric. In the run-up to the 2012 summer Olympic games, there was a sense of renewed hope just a few years after the global financial crash had left the UK strangled by austerity.

England's capital city was granted an Olympic cash injection, as seen by the building of the main stadium in Stratford, revitalising "one of the most challenged places in the UK".

But when the media arrived to report on the torch procession, attention was not on the grand new venue, or even the Olympic flame, but on the colourful high streets in the London Borough of Waltham Forest; remarkable considering how, just four months previously, it was blighted by empty premises, economic stagnation, and declining footfall.

Investing in the Grassroots

Scaffolding had only just been taken down when the torch passed through in June 2012; the idea of it even going up in the first place was only conceived in February of that year.

That unprecedented turnaround time was all thanks to Jan Kattein Architects, a studio chosen by the local Council for their experience in "shop fronts and building facade restoration work," founder Dr Jan Kattein tells us.

Trust in the studio was earned two years earlier when Jan's team renovated nine storefronts on High Road Leyton.

The leader of the Council had been so impressed with the outcome of that project that they "set aside another three quarters of a million pounds to do another five parades in the town centre" – parades being a string of storefronts on a high street.

The caveat was that they had to be completed in their entirety by the time the Olympic torch passed through five months later – a tall order!

"We broke the project up into short, small parcels, which is the opposite of what the public sector would normally do," Jan explains. "They normally try and consolidate lots of small projects into big projects, but we thought, 'If we are going to get this done, we're going to have to get small suppliers involved who can mobilise immediately, who are agile and flexible.'"

By assigning three contractors to deal with "one or two terraces on the high street" each, they managed to complete the renaissance just in time for the torch to pass through a totally transformed town centre. For the international press, it represented London getting ready to welcome the world.

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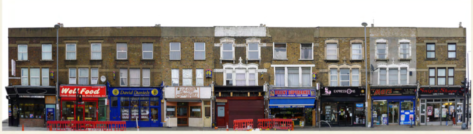
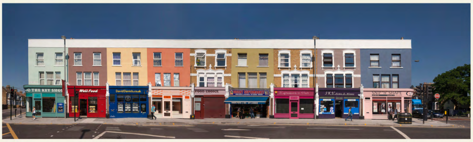


Before. Image credit: Jan Kattein Architects



And after. Image Credit: Morley van Sternberg

Leyton's First Recovery

Walk around Waltham Forest now, and you'll likely stroll onto one of these vibrant high streets soon enough.

"On average, every Londoner lives within five minutes of a high street or town centre," Jan tells us. This explains why, in their heyday, more than "90% of people locally [were] employed in high street shops," Jan explains. The borough's fragile economy was dependent on maintaining healthy city centres but, like many of Greater London's 600 or more decentralised high streets and neighbourhood parades, they were affected disastrously by competition from online retailers, big chain brands, and out-of-town malls.

Shops struggled and closed. People lost their jobs. Pavements fell into disrepair, becoming cracked, uneven, and dangerous. Social infrastructure evaporated and the rot set in.

"Leyton was troubled," Jan tells us. "It was a crime hotspot. There were quite a few empty shops. Some of the buildings on the high street were derelict and it looked like a pretty hopeless case."

The Leyton Buzz – Reviving a City Centre

The first high street Jan worked on was a bit of an experiment, but ended up serving as a pilot for other areas in Waltham Forest

If the high street could be rescued, some bright spark thought, then retailers, jobs, and customers would return, and criminals would be shooed away.

Credit has to go to Waltham Forest Council. When funding for the Olympic games was distributed among London's boroughs, this local authority decided to invest their share "in the grassroots, in our small-scale local economy, into our high streets," Jan recalls with a degree of admiration.

The Redesign Process

When his team came on board, they met with local businesses to identify the high street's pain points and set to work on refurbishing the buildings and facades of the first nine properties.

They planned a coherent look for the length of the high street, whilst simultaneously designing a unique new identity for each business.

> *Sometimes you can do a lot of work with a few buckets of paint and some good conversation with the owners of empty shops.*

Behind Jan's success is the understanding that the community had to be involved in the revival of their own town centres. Each project always began with stakeholder consultation. The good thing about shopkeepers is, you know where to find them.

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One seller of women's wear wanted a change of direction, our CityChanger recalls: "I said to her, 'Penny, what's your dream?' She said, 'Jan, I'd always wanted to have a bridal wear shop.' So that's what we did for her."

The first revamped storefronts "really stood out" against the "decaying and crumbling" facades on that terrace. The facades had been painted "in the most amazingly colourful way, because we needed to demonstrate a visual change". It announced to the public that it's time to come back to the high street, and they did, valuing the eclectic mix that only independent businesses can offer.

In Leyton, these now include restaurants offering various national cuisines, hairdressers, a tattoo parlour, curb side cafes, an art gallery, and a hardware shop.

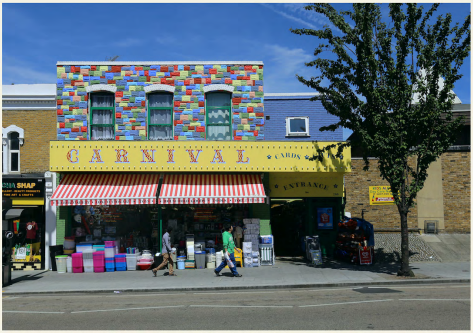

Image credit: Jan Kattein Architects

High Street Hacks

Jan's studio has now completed this process 30 times, each incorporating a handful of innovations that create a better trading environment for small-scale retailers.

Flexible Shop Spaces – and Policy

A lot of Jan's recent projects have purposely "introduced a lot of micro-retail and flexible business spaces into high streets" that make them more suitable for entrepreneurs and startups.

Interiors incorporating adaptable features, like movable walls, can be used by current businesses but also easily adapted to the operational needs of future occupants. That avoids the conversion costs only big brands have the capital to absorb, making high street spaces much more accessible for micro-businesses.

These spaces are usually small enough to fall "below the threshold where they would attract business rates," making them even more affordable. That's attractive to new enterprises that need a low-risk environment where they can try new ideas – and fail without too many consequences.

> *They can't take the risk of buying a 20-year lease when they don't actually know whether they're going to be there still in a year's time.*

That's why the project team on many of Jan's projects also negotiated new terms with landowners that offer low-risk terms that encourage entrepreneurs to take a chance, such as a one month notice period or temporary rent-free occupancy.

"It is really important to me because I don't feel like we've done our job until things are stable, and they're working and delivering that social value that we've set out to deliver."

Ladbrokes
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Unlocking Civic Spaces

One of the advantages of what's happening in Leyton is that it is low-impact construction: refurbishing existing buildings is more cost- and time efficient than building new.

With the right policy reform, occupied and empty properties are also becoming readymade and accessible civic spaces, which make the arts accessible for everyone, including "people who don't have a big disposable income".

By opening libraries at night, for example, they "become really exciting venues" for social, cultural, and economic events. It reminds us that activating high streets is not about supercharging commerce but about making them people centric.

Benefits of Being on the Outside

Waltham Forest Council displayed good leadership when they backed-up efforts without interfering.

Projects like this don't need direction from top tier management, Jan believes. "It's perfectly acceptable that you have other priorities if you're running a whole local authority."

In his experience, being an external agent was advantageous for two reasons.

First, when the public realised that they were being approached by architects not Council workers, their suspicions melted away, easing dialogue.

> *The [regeneration] request often comes from the public sector, but the engagement process and ultimately the consensus building is one that we are better placed to own than the city itself.*

Second, council departments are known to have contradictory priorities. The activities of those tasked with keeping the traffic moving may not align with colleagues trying to improve citizen and environmental healthy, for example.

We all know how a child that plays up for its parents will behave if reprimanded by a stranger. It works a bit like this in local government too: Jan found that departments were more likely to cooperate with an external facilitator leading the project – and this was essential for completing the high street project in four months.

"Being an outside organisation allows us to be more effective," Jan observes. "There's a different power dynamic. Suddenly when we come and advise the public sector that something is a good solution, it bears more weight."

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Signs of an Active High Street

The renewed prosperity of Waltham Forest's high streets demonstrates how built and social architecture can be wielded to make a positive civic and economic impact.

But just because the process can be explained simply, doesn't mean it should be viewed lightly.

"All these projects, they're hell of a lot of work," Jan admits. It was only because of the dedication of his team that the studio was able to get the high streets ready for the Olympic torch procession on time: they cancelled all holiday and worked countless extra hours.

Was it worth it? Absolutely, Jan remarks.

More than a decade later, while landlords in other parts of London are struggling to find tenants, vacancies along the redesigned parades are still rare. In fact, Leyton's renovated high streets are seeing increasing demand, and in other areas of Waltham Forest there are waiting lists.

Regenerating Town Centres: Key Takeaways

Benefits:

- Thriving high streets provide jobs, services, and essential social infrastructure in the heart of the neighbourhood
- Flexible workspaces invite new businesses to take a chance, filling empty properties – good for a town's aesthetics and landlords' cash flows
- Diverse local shops have a natural home on the high street, and meet demands for the kind of retailers that the public cannot get online or from chain brands

Challenges:

- Renovations may be relatively affordable by local authority budgets, but not independent businesses; decision-makers need to invest in the future of their town
- Until they see evidence of change, business owners may view anyone involved in a renovation project with suspicion due to past disappointments
- Bringing together council departments to work on a single project can be problematic if they have contradictory priorities

How to get started:

- Dialogue with businesses is always the first step – it builds trust and identifies the pain points
- Visuals count for a lot – painting facades can give the high street a fresh feel and a shared identity
- Work with existing social infrastructure, like libraries, to provide cultural events that bring additional footfall and a sense of community to the high street

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