

Pavement cafes as the activity zone in the social life of neighbourhood centres

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Abstract: This paper reports the findings from a research project that examines the relationship between urban design and the physical environment, and aspects of social and communal life in suburbs. Australian suburbs are perceived to be lacking in vitality and sociability. To address this, three suburban commercial streets were selected for investigation. Through documents and maps of the residents' activities and behaviour, this study aims to identify the popular zones of activity and investigate the physical characteristics that encourage a sociable atmosphere in activity zones. The observation of activities in the three streets has been registered in tables relative to the date and time of occurrence. According to the behavioural mappings, the zones of activity are mostly shaped around pavement cafes and popular everyday food stores. Since more than half the activities have been observed to be initiated from the pavement cafes, this paper will investigate how the physical qualities of commercial streets such as the width of the pavements, personalization, soft edges and greenery have contributed to the pavement café culture in the selected neighbourhood centres.

Keywords: Social life; neighbourhood centre; commercial street; café culture.

1. Introduction

Social life has been defined as everything that occurs in public spaces: sitting, chatting, walking, cycling, running, standing and playing, which form "the life between buildings" (Gehl, 1987). In this sense, public life is translated into the presence of people and residents in their practice of everyday life in the public spaces of cities and neighbourhoods. According to Bianchini, social life is "the interacting of socialising or sociability...that occurs within the public realm" (Bianchini, 1999).

Over recent decades, the social life of neighbourhoods and suburbs has become a rising concern among scholars in the built environment discipline (Cohrun, 1994; Ferman and Kaylor, 2001; Sullivan, 2004; Mehta, 2013). In particular, suburbs have been criticized for their lack of vitality and social life (Davidson and Cotter, 1991; Richards, 1994). Therefore, identifying the built environment features that may contribute to the social life of suburbs and neighbourhoods can be a solution for creating vitality and life in residential settlements.

Suburbs are a combination of residential streets and commercial streets. Within the boundaries of neighbourhoods and suburbs, the commercial street is the context of social life and interaction among residents (Farahani and Lozanovska, 2014). The design and development of neighbourhood centres and suburban commercial streets can provide an opportunity for socializing behaviour among residents.

This paper aims to define the physical characteristics that may encourage the social life in commercial streets. To facilitate the process, the patterns of activities observed in three commercial streets (as the case studies of this research) have been mapped and registered in the tables of activities based on the time of occurrence (Farahani et al., 2015). The analysis of these mappings and tables shows that pavement cafes form a popular zone of activity in these streets. Therefore, in this paper, the built environment characteristics and the physical qualities that have contributed to the popularity of pavement cafes as activity zones will be investigated.

2. Theories around the café culture, third places

In recent years, theories have been formed around the importance of cafes for the social life of public spaces in cities. The theory of third places by Oldenburg (1989) can be considered as one of the key theories cited in several studies around the subject of social life (Banerjee, 2001; Mehta and Bosson, 2009; Simon, 2009; Francis et al., 2012; Henriksen and Tjora, 2013; Mehta, 2014). A third place, as described by Oldenburg (1989), is a place of refuge, where people can relax, commune and interact. They are places of satisfying social needs, where one can meet friends, colleagues, neighbours and even strangers. As opposed to the first place of home and the second place of work, third places can satisfy our desire for relaxation, social contact, entertainment and leisure. There is a wide range of third places, including cafes, pubs, local stores, bookshops, post office, restaurants, residential street gathering places or pavements and a bench in the local park (Oldenburg, 1989). “The best third places are locally owned, independent, small-scale, steady-state businesses and both government and incorporated chain operations have wreaked havoc upon them” (Oldenburg, 2009).

According to Banerjee (2001), in contemporary society, it is the appropriate mix of *flânerie* and third places that dictates the script for a successful public life. *Flânerie* refers to ‘hangout’ places such as new shopping malls that are designed to encourage this behaviour. Banerjee refers to third places and the streets that promote hanging-out as reinvented streets. These streets can be located in the heart of the city, serving city dwellers, or in the heart of neighbourhoods serving the locality.

Montgomery (1997) argued that the café culture (in the form of pavement cafes) has brought several benefits to the urban life of British cities. Pavement cafes are places of interaction and meeting new people. Cafés are not associated with particular ethnic traditions as with a pub. Additionally, they are not alcohol centred and thus can attract diverse types of people. Pavement cafes are places of great interaction with the street and improve visibility. In this sense, they help to increase the natural surveillance of streets. Compared to pubs and bars, café are able to attract a more diverse age-group of people. Cafes are also places where a great deal of business is transacted, and pavement café culture is perhaps one of the few remedies to the fully privatized public realm.

Café culture in Australia and cities such as Melbourne and Geelong has become a part of the city image, specifically for tourism and destination marketing. Until World War II, Australians, in the tradition of their British forebears, were mostly drinking tea and beer and pub culture was more dominant. An influx of Southern European migrants to Australia brought with them a love of coffee, and the social rituals that accompany it (Walters and Broom, 2013).

3. Study area

The suburban lifestyle is associated with a lack of vitality and social life (Davidson and Cotter, 1991; Richards, 1994). According to Richards (1994), suburban living has two faces: the dream achieved and the nightmare of dreary living, deprivation and isolation. To address the social life of suburban developments, this study will examine three case studies. Suburbs are usually a combination of residential streets and a few commercial streets, serving the residents in the form of neighbourhood centres. Scholars commonly interpret commercial activities as central to local community life and identity (Jacobs, 1961; Oldenburg, 1999; Deener, 2007). Researchers have viewed commerce as the source of neighbourhood safety (Jacobs, 1961), and the core of democratic participation and community vitality (Oldenburg, 1999). This study aims to focus on the social life of commercial streets in residential suburbs of Geelong as representative of the wider context of Australian suburbs. The case studies were chosen because of their different character and type of social life.

The first case study is located in Bell Park, a residential suburb with industrial areas to the east. The selected area of Separation St in Bell Park is a strip mall separated from the main high-speed lanes through a green filter and a parking area. Similar to other selected areas, the selected area is a part of a larger, commercial, educational and recreational development.



Figure 1: a - Separation St in Bell Park; b- Pakington St in Geelong West; c- Belle Vue Ave.

The second case study is a section of Pakington Street in Geelong West. Pakington St is a commercial street, with shops on both sides and pavements and the car lanes in the middle. The North end of Pakington St is home to a myriad of shops, including retail, fashion, restaurants, pubs and local services. The third case study, Highton Shopping Village, has a more complex morphogenesis. It has a strip mall in the north, and two pedestrian alleys, providing a bazaar-like atmosphere and access the west side of the shopping area. Car park spaces behind the retail activity provide a safe pedestrian environment in Belle Vue Ave. The urban form in the Highton shopping centre consists of small local retail stores in addition to a small supermarket, library and clinic. Belle Vue Ave performs as a miniature main street with very slow vehicular traffic (Figure 1).

4. Methodology

Observation has been characterized as “the fundamental base of all research methods” in the social and behavioural sciences (Adler and Adler, 1994). Qualitative social researchers are observers of both

human activities and the physical settings in which such activities occur. In unobtrusive observation, the observer does not interact with participants, but simply records their behaviours. The primary tool or method for studying everyday life in public spaces is a direct (yet discreet) observation of behaviours, with a particular focus on how these relate to spatial features (Gehl and Svarre, 2013; Stevens, 2014). Direct observations provide an avenue to understand why and how some spaces are used frequently while others are quite underused. The analysis of people's use of public spaces identifies links between observed activities and the physical environment where they occur (Stevens, 2014).

For this study, data was collected through case studies and unobtrusive observations of users in natural settings (the three commercial streets). There was no interaction with individuals or manipulation of the environment. Data was collected on the same day for each street on 4 days with similar weather conditions, from early November till early December in 2014. On each day, the temperature was between 15°C and 27°C, which is considered suitable for being outside. The selected suburban commercial streets, which are similar in length (around 280 metres) were divided into eight identifiable sections. Each section was video recorded for 30 seconds, every two hours, from 8:00 am to 10:00 pm. The short movies were inspected carefully and mapped in the format of visual tables registering the type of activities, the placement of activities, approximate age group, the time of the activities, and the connection of the activity to the related use on the street (Figure 2).

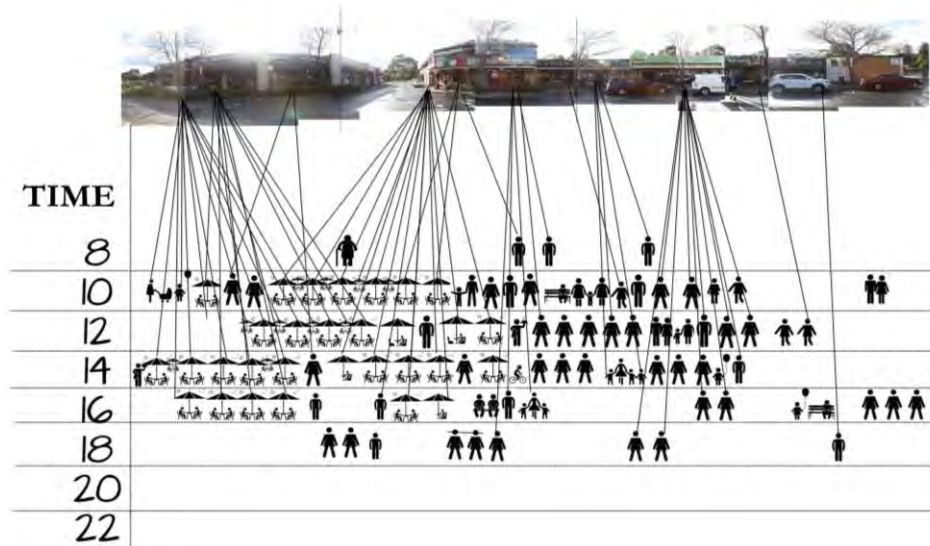


Figure 2: Observation mappings at Highton on Monday from 8:00 am to 10:00 pm.

5. Identifying the zones of activity

Gehl (1987) divides public space activities to the three categories of necessary activities, optional activities, and social activities. Necessary activities are the compulsory ones, including going to school or work, shopping and running errands. According to Gehl (1987), the activities in this group are slightly influenced by the physical setting. These activities will frequently take place throughout the year and are less dependent on the exterior condition. Optional activities include those pursuits that occur when there is a wish to do so or if the time and place encourage them, such as walking to breathe fresh air

and sunbathing. When outdoor areas are of poor quality, optional activities seldom occur. Social activities are the ones that depend on the presence of others in public spaces, including children at play, greetings and conversations, and communal activities.

Although Gehl's classification of outdoor activities sheds some light on the role of the built environment, in a suburban commercial street it was found that 'necessary, optional and social' activities mingled and were not clearly definable. Mehta (2013) adopted another method for classifying the zones of activity on commercial streets. He observed three zones of activity on pavements, wherever there was enough room to accommodate all of them. The first zone appears along the edges of buildings and inhabits the activities that are related to the interaction of the building edges and the pavement, such as entering and exiting, window-shopping, reading signs displayed by the stores, standing and often leaning on the building façade, and using a public phone or ATM.

The second zone located in the middle of the pavement is primarily for pedestrian movement, while the third zone, which is also the most richly furnished one, is inhabited by the majority of the stationary and social activities such as sitting, people-watching, reading, eating and drinking, talking, socializing, sleeping, playing a game and children playing (Mehta, 2013).

The mappings below illustrate the type and placement of activities on a Saturday on the three streets. We have identified the part of the street where the agglomeration of the activities was highest (the parts in the rectangles). These parts, which are considered the zones of activity, can be classified in three groups (Numbers 1, 2 and 3 in Figure 3). The first zone is created by pavement cafés. Not only do several activities happen around the cafés and restaurants, but also the duration of these activities is the longest. The most eventful spaces on the pavements are the ones claimed by the café's temporary chairs and shades. The second zone of activity occurs around those facilities that serve the residents on a frequent basis. Everyday uses and services such as supermarket, butcher, bakery, and grocery stores usually attract a high level of frequent coming and going activities. This zone is noticeable in the part of Highton Shopping Village where a butcher, bakery, grocery and newsagent have been placed next to each other, attracting a great number of activities. The third zone, which might not be clearly visible, forms around the connecting points of the popular zones such as everyday food stores. For instance, in Highton, a pedestrian alley, followed by a pedestrian crossing connects the supermarket to the other side of the street, where the second activity zone is located (Number 3 in Figure 3). As the mapping shows, this zone is mostly occupied by coming and going activities.

Based on the observations, more than 75% of the activities have been formed around the pavement cafés (highlighted activities in Figure 3). Therefore, this study considers the café culture as a potential setting to strengthen the social atmosphere of commercial streets. However, the social atmosphere fabricated by the café culture is not the same for every café or restaurant. Not every café and restaurant façade interacts with the pavement or street. In fact, cafes adopt different approaches to communicate their social presence in the street. This study investigates the physical setting that may facilitate the success of café culture. There are 24 cafes and restaurants in the case studies (8 on each street). Based on the observations, we have selected the nine most successful cafes or restaurants (three on each street). The affordance of the streets in hosting pavement dining will be investigated through the comparison of these cafes and the result of observations (The term 'affordance' refers to the physical characteristics that allow or encourage specific behaviours or activities (Lang, 1987)).

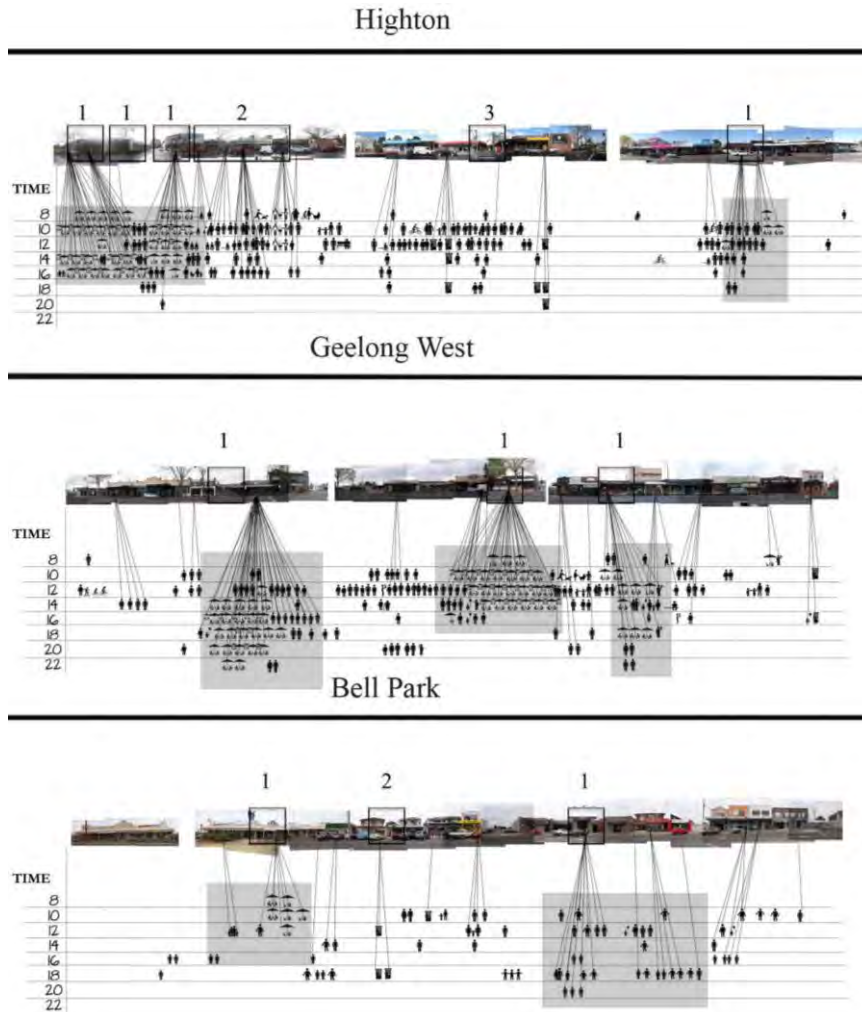


Figure 3: Highlighted activities have occurred in relation to the pavement cafes and restaurants.

6. Physical qualities of cafés and the social life of the street

Cafes, restaurants and bars may contribute to the social life of commercial streets at different levels. Pavement cafés and restaurants with a higher number of enduring and stationary activities are more efficacious than indoor ones, which merely add to the number of coming and going activities. The following analysis addresses the physical qualities that may encourage pavement dining.

Based on the literature, several physical qualities that may affect the social life of commercial streets (Farahani and Lozanovska, 2014). Among these characteristics, we have selected the ones that may directly contribute to the success of pavement dining. These qualities include the width of sidewalk or front yard (outdoor sitting area), the area available for outside dining, the amount of personalization, the softness of edges, and landscaping. Although measuring the width of sidewalks and the area of

outside seating is straightforward, the three latter characteristics are not simply quantifiable. Therefore, to quantify personalization, softness of the edges, and greenery, a rating system was developed based on the definitions of these terms in the literature.

Personalization- Personalization is the act of modifying the physical environment toward an expression of claiming a territory (Mehta, 2009). Personalisation is usually accompanied by territorialisation or creating an identity. Kopec (2006) describes personalization as a physical marker used to identify personal identity, mark territories and hence regulate social interaction. According to Abu-Ghazze (2000), personalisation is a way for people to modify their environment and make it distinctly theirs and different from others. Based on the observations, five types of personalization have been identified: advertisement board, decorative features, shades and chairs, flower box, and vertical filters (barriers for defining territory). In order to quantify personalization, a value of two has been given to each item. Therefore, personalization has been evaluated between zero and ten depending on how many types of personalization have been seen on site.

Soft edges- “Soft edges” is a term coined by Gehl to describe indistinct boundaries between public and private spaces. According to Gehl (2010), the characteristics that contribute to the softness of edges are: scale and rhythm, transparency, appeal to many senses, texture and fine details, diversity of functions and vertical façade rhythm. Gehl (1987) argues that soft edges encourage a feeling of safety through communicating with people. Mehta (2013) uses the term “dull facades” and believes that dull building facades are dead spaces, which are not sufficiently welcoming. The quality of public spaces within the city is of vital importance in creating a vibrant and lively city. “Soft” or active edges containing many details add to the quality of public spaces. A clear demarcation between public and private, active façades and appropriate urban furniture encourage people to stay in public spaces. Active facades refer to the facades where the inside and the outside uses are “connected visually and thus can enrich and inspire each other” (Gehl and Gemzøe, 2004). Gehl argues that no other element has a greater impact on the life and attractiveness of city space than active, open and lively facades (Gehl, 2010). Based on the observations, three items that contribute to the softness of edges have been identified: level of details, visual connection of inside and outside and permeability. In order to quantify soft edges, a value of two has been given to each item. Therefore, personalization has been evaluated between zero and six, depending on how many of the items can be seen in each café edge.

Landscape and greenery- Landscape and greenery is believed to have contributing effects on the social life of neighbourhoods and commercial streets (Whyte, 1980). A study of neighbourhood common spaces indicated that the presence of trees and grass is related to the use of outdoor spaces, the amount of social activity that takes place within them, and the proportion of social to non-social activities they support (Sullivan, 2004). Nasar and Julian (1995) found easy access to common outdoor green space increased sense of community. Greenery and landscaping not only encourage activities by tempering the atmosphere, but may also function as a traffic barrier or shade. Therefore, in regard to the role that the landscape plays and based on the observations, five items have been identified: beautification, defining territory, traffic barrier, cleanliness, and shading. A value of two has been given to each item. Therefore, each café’s landscape has been evaluated between zero and ten depending on how many of the items can be seen.

Table 1 summarizes the physical attributes of the nine most successful cafes in the case studies. The physical attributes have been quantified in order to generate a clear picture of how they might encourage pavement dining.

Table 1: Comparison of observed activities and the physical characteristics of cafes.

Cafe	Suburb	Number of patrons	Number of stationary activities	Width of sidewalk or front yard	Area	Personalization	Softness of edges	Greenery
1	Highton	39	38	5-8 m	140	8	6	8
2	Highton	30	26	4.5-12 m	100	8	6	8
3	Highton	9	5	3.5 m	30	6	4	8
4	Geelong West	61	60	7 m	90	8	6	4
5	Geelong West	28	26	6 m	60	8	6	8
6	Geelong West	25	7	3.5 m	35	6	6	0
7	Bell Park	14	8	4 m	50	6	2	0
8	Bell Park	12	0	2.5-4.6 m	25	0	2	4
9	Bell Park	9	0	4 m	25	2	4	0

The table shows that the number of activities generated by cafes correlates with the width of pavements and seating area, personalization, softness of edges and landscape. Although analysing nine cases will not provide enough data to prove the exact effect of these characteristics, the table generates a pattern of how and to what extent these features may encourage pavement dining. According to the table, cafes with more than 25 patrons had a sidewalk or seating area more than 5 metres wide, and a seating area larger than 60 square metres. Popular pavement cafés have usually been located in the widest section of the footpath (café number 1, 2 and 4). However, sometimes the pavements are not wide enough to provide the necessary room for outdoor dining. For some cafes (number 4 and 5), the possession of an open or semi-open area is of such importance that they have allocated the outdoor space from a part of their land and interior space.

The width of pavements is not the only prerequisite for outside dining. The personalizing and defining of the outdoor dining area seems to be critical for the popularity of a pavement café. For instance, café number 5 has two separate dining areas, one on the sidewalk separated from the street by flower boxes and the other a semi-public open area within the lot surrounded by walls and separated from the sidewalk by short fences. The observations showed that the space surrounded by walls is full of customers throughout the entire day, while the space on the sidewalk is hardly used. Cafes may define and personalize the dining space by different elements, including shades, flower boxes, awnings, columns, panels, and greenery. Popular pavement cafes (all the cafes, except 8 and 9) have all used different elements to personalize the outside space. As the table shows, all the pavement cafes have used at least three modes of personalization.

Facades may achieve softness through transparency, permeability and the level of details. Softness of edges seems to positively correlate with the number of outside activities. Based on the observations, the five cafes with the highest number of activities had the highest ranking for softness. The softness of edges not only provides the interior with a view of the outside, but also benefits cafes in linking the inside space to the pavement area. It also facilitates the flow of service for outside users.

Although greenery may provide a nice atmosphere to encourage outside activities, it does not seem to be a prerequisite for pavement dining. For instance, café 6 with no greenery still had a considerable number of patrons dining outside. Usually cafes use greenery as a means of beautification and defining boundaries and also as a traffic barrier.

Among the case studies, there are two cafes in Geelong West with a branch in Highton (cafés number 3 and 4 and cafés number 2 and 6). The cuisine and menu, the quality of food, style and non-physical features among these branches are the same. However, the affordance of the built environment has caused one of the cafes to have a successful street life in Geelong West, while the other one is more successful in Highton. These two cafes and their branches make a good case for the significance of the built environment in promoting café culture and the social life of commercial streets. Wherever the environment affords, these cafes have benefited from the outdoor area for pavement dining.

Cafes can interact with the sidewalk in three ways. First, if the sidewalk is wide enough and the environment is desirable, they might claim the sidewalk as a place to put their chairs and shades. Second, if the sidewalk is not wide enough, they might sacrifice a part of their own lot as an outdoor space to provide a shaded or semi-shaded area that performs as a pavement café and contributes to the social life of the street. And if there is not enough space for dining outside, blurring the boundary and using transparency with an open front can be a solution for stitching the interior to the pavement. However, when the outside environment is not entirely desirable, cafes seek hard edges to minimize the interaction between the interior and the exterior (café 8).

7. Conclusion

Australian suburbs are associated with a lack of vitality. Certain features of the built environment may encourage activities and mitigate this lack of social life. Based on our observations, we have identified three zones of activity on commercial streets. The behavioural mappings showed that restaurants and bars, as the first zone of activity, engender most of the stationary activities on commercial streets. Pavement cafes with a high number of staying activities create a sociable atmosphere and are vital to the image of their neighbourhood centres. Therefore, outdoor dining is important for the social life of commercial streets. There are several physical qualities that may affect the social life of commercial streets. Among these characteristics, the ones that may directly contribute to the success of pavement dining are observed to be the width of sidewalk or front yard (outdoor sitting area), the area available for outside dining, the amount of personalization, softness of edges and landscape. These qualities have been investigated for the 9 most successful cafes in the three case studies and the results have been summarized for analysis.

Cafes tend to claim the storefront, where the pavements are wide and there is enough room for a dining area. The personalization or defining the boundaries of the dining area through physical elements such as panels and shades is a critical factor in the popularity of pavement cafes. A soft facade with permeability and transparency is another physical quality that may affect the success of outdoor dining. On the streets where these qualities are lacking, cafes try to avoid street dining and draw the population into their interior.

The findings improve and broaden our understanding of the physical characteristics that influence the social life and patterns of activities in commercial streets and provide evidence that pavement dining plays an important role in creating vital neighbourhood centres.

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