

Search



Local | World | Business | Sports | Lifestyle | Columns | Letters | Media & Marketing | Fashion & Beauty | Photos | Community

Bring social features back to the high street

Posted on 19 August 2011 - 05:12am
Salina Christmas

THE discourses over the London riots, predictably, are dominated by blanket statements. The right-wing politicians cry "criminality", the impassioned social worker talks of social deprivation, and then there is the stigmatising tirade on race as the proxy of criminality and lousy parenting.

It is a wonder that authorities and the media don't bother to ask anthropologists, who make it their business to study group behaviours and communities, for advice before issuing these proclamations, or before asking an LA cop for tips on fixing the "broken society".

But anthropologists are not in the habit of discussing their findings in the media, or to be the first to hog the limelight with sweeping statements. The riots did get the social scientists talking behind closed doors, in particular on what makes the retailers of shoes, plasma TVs, clothes and mobile phones sitting ducks in times of social unrest.

"The types of goods looted indicate an exclusion of consumption in the looters' day-to-day lives," said one, who is researching on the consumption of female undergarments. "The looters tend to go for things found in the living room."

Another posited that it wasn't about a band of angry rioters. The rioting and looting were participatory and were therefore social. They "participated" and "consumed". The young, strong males rioted, and then other members of the community, including the females, piled in and looted.

"It seems obvious to me," observed another, a Peckham native who had to watch his town go up in flames on the internet from his fieldwork in Zimbabwe. "We brandish these things in the faces of people who don't have these marks of desirability, then are confused when they tell us they want them too!"

I look at a South London street for my research, and I am intrigued by the way the London built environment is constructed socially by the town square and green areas, and economically by the high street.

Lately, the redevelopment focus has been more on the commercial, with libraries and youth centres giving way to cafes and shops. The high streets were built on a model of mass consumption of goods which began during the Industrial Revolution. That formula of "shops, a cinema, a main post office, and at least three banks" hasn't changed much since the 1960s.

The high street, however, only works when you have enough number of consumers with disposable income. We're in the second dip of a double-dip recession. Two London boroughs, Haringey – where the Tottenham riot kicked off – and Lewisham, make up the UK's top 10 employment blackspots' list on and off for the past seven years.

E-commerce and other forms of non-store retailing have battered the real estate model, but the high street still figures high on the hierarchy of a London urban setting because of the social presence it facilitates.

In its most premium incarnations, such as Regent Street, Bond Street and King's Road, the high street becomes a showcase of items of desirability, also a place for shoppers to be seen and assessed by others as they consume.

Shopping is not necessarily about fulfilling provisional needs, said Holbrook and Jackson (1996). It is "a skilled social accomplishment, providing both pleasure and anxiety". The opulence of the designer high streets might be perplexing to some, but these streets play a crucial role in delineating one's taste, a way of signalling one's social and economic status.

The Afro-Caribbean communities I spoke to felt betrayed and humiliated by the rioters. They wondered why the rioters, some as young as seven, "are freely available to have nothing to do". Government cutbacks were blamed, as well as commercial projects that are created to benefit a segment of professionals, but not the locals in terms of employment.

Today's Most Viewed

- **Cabbie pleads guilty to charging RM450 for 4.8km ride**
- **Get Smart with Samsung**
- **Suicide car bombs hit Nigerian newspaper offices**
- **DAP senator opposes Bersih 3.0**
- **Less media coverage on Bersih 3.0, says CIJ**

theSun **MAPCU** Scholarship Fund

Advertise with us. [CLICK TO FIND OUT HOW](#)

Finding it difficult to get hold of a copy of theSun?

theSun **SUBSCRIBE**

One Way Airfare Ex-Subang

BERJAYA AIR

Langkawi from **RM 99*** Redang from **RM 141***

Pangkor from **RM 99*** Koh Samui from **RM 225***

Tioman from **RM 95***

*T & C Apply

Download FREE E-paper

"I feel angry because these kids are the people I engage with daily," said Dominic Patmore, a social entrepreneur originally from New York, who supports disadvantaged youths in Hackney through weight-lifting programmes and social maths. He also writes apps for sports for Android devices.

His proposal on social maths got rejected by the local authorities because of lack of funding. He was dismayed by the arson and looting, which hurt the working class population, but could see why the looters went for the high street chains. "When you have no money, you get to look," he said, "and then you have envy."

What works in a premium tourism hotspot cannot be pulled off in deprived areas. But the high street will remain essential to the local economy, and can play a role in regeneration. Judging from the wanton destruction of London inner cities, there is an economic case for it.

Retail can offer not only access to goods and services, but can co-exist with social features of the high street such as the library, the sports centre and communal areas. It's not enough fortifying high street retail with guards and closed-circuit TVs. Community presence is effective in maintaining social order, too.

A community forms its identity based upon what it socialises around, be it space, customs and ways of consuming. Social presence, therefore, should be measured not just by what we consume, but also by other types of social participation at community level.

Salina Christmas is a journalist. She is also doing research on community informatics and neighbourhood safety for MSc Digital Anthropology at University College London. Comments: letters@thesundaily.com

[Like](#) One person likes this. Be the first of your friends.

Share this news:



Monthly archive

- [April 2012](#)
- [March 2012](#)
- [February 2012](#)
- [January 2012](#)
- [December 2011](#)
- [November 2011](#)
- [October 2011](#)
- [September 2011](#)
- [August 2011](#)
- [July 2011](#)
- [June 2011](#)
- [May 2011](#)

Kuala Lumpur



- Broken clouds, light rain
- Temperature: 23 °C
- Wind: Variable from West to North, 9.3 km/h

Reported on: Fri, 27/04/2012 - 5:00am

[Local](#) [World](#) [Business](#) [Sports](#) [Lifestyle](#) [Columns](#) [Letters](#) [Media & Marketing](#) [Fashion & Beauty](#) [Photos](#) [Community](#)

[Home](#) [Contact Us](#) [Follow Us](#) [RSS](#) [Advertise with Us](#)

Copyright © 2012 Sun Media Corporation Sdn. Bhd. All rights reserved.