

# Repurposing Underused Public Spaces into Urban Commons

An active participatory urban regeneration model for Gospel Oak

London, UK

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## Thematic line:

Urban commons, public space, social action and social innovation, collaborative planning, creative cities.

## Abstract:

This paper proposes a framework for repurposing underused public spaces into 'urban commons'.

The concept of the 'commons' is historically regarded as public land and resources accessible to all members of society for their benefit. This paper explores how citizens can appropriate community development through the urban commons. This follows the identification of the urban commons framework, which is based on four elements identified on this research paper: (i) public space, (ii) collective governance, (iii) hands-on activities, and (iv) benefits accelerating community development.

This framework is, hypothetically, applied to Gospel Oak (GO) community, in north London, taken as the application site due to abundance of local underused public spaces combined with high levels of community deprivation.

This paper also tackles how the urban commons development model could be scaled from community to city scale, looking mainly at the United Kingdom (UK) collaborative planning context.

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Complete work can be found on:

[issuu.com/sofiacrosomazzuco/docs/sofia\\_croso\\_mazzuco\\_urban\\_commons\\_-](https://issuu.com/sofiacrosomazzuco/docs/sofia_croso_mazzuco_urban_commons_-)

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## O Homem; as viagens (Man; the voyages)

(...) the only thing left to man  
(will he be equipped?)  
is the difficult, ever dangerous journey  
from within to within himself  
step on the ground  
of his own heart  
experiment  
colonise  
humanise  
man  
discovering in his own unexplored bowels  
the everlasting unsuspected happiness  
of living together.

*Carlos Drummond de Andrade*  
Brazilian poet

### Objectives:

The main objective of this paper is to clarify the structure of the urban commons and raise awareness of the value of public space as a resource for community development and collaborative planning models.

Moreover, this paper aims to enlighten the social and pedagogical value associated with collective and hands-on public space regeneration - imbued in the urban commons structure - which results in active service co-production supporting community and urban development.

This paper focuses mainly on the collaborative planning context in the United Kingdom, analysing its qualities and flaws, while proposing means for strengthening the collaborative scenario.

### Methodology:

A thorough literature review was analysed to contextualise the emergence of collaborative planning and governance models.

Analysis also covered case studies on grassroot initiatives, recognised as urban commons, that overcome the diminished value of public life through citizens reclaiming public spaces. This investigation led to a definition of the framework of the urban commons.

A project for transforming underused local public spaces into urban commons, based on the identified framework, is proposed for Gospel Oak, a community located in the Borough of Camden, North London.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Commons

The concept of the commons was made widely known by the research of economist Elinor Ostrom<sup>1</sup>. It denotes public land and natural resources - such as water and air - accessible to all members of society for development and survival, around which, historically, commoners organised themselves as self-governing collectives.

Originally, the commons related to rural contexts, but have recently been re-contextualised to urban scenarios through the term urban commons, regarding resources available in cities.

## 1.2. The 'tragedy of the commons'

The "tragedy of the commons"<sup>2</sup> is defined as the privatisation of resources intended for community development. This is reflected on the privatisation of public spaces and a varied array of services - such as health provision, food production, education and culture.

## 1.3 Public life end

The striking amount of underused and misused public spaces in urban contexts shows the extent to which the value of public space is underestimated.

With public life being confused with "commercial transaction and consumption"<sup>3</sup> following public space privatisation along limitation of activities allowed to take place within it<sup>4</sup> public space became a stage of superficial exchanges, lacking citizens' sense of belonging.

Meaningful social activities had been confined to private spaces, diminishing the sense of public life<sup>5</sup>.

## 1.4 Centralised x Collaborative planning governance

The privatisation of the urban commons is a process that occurs side by side with centralised planning governance. The 'tragedy of the commons' prevents communities to directly assess and benefit from local resources, while centralised governance systems prevent communities from assessing decision making in matters regarding their own development.

Nonetheless, with socio-economic crisis impacting the way provisions are delivered, planning systems are gradually being structured to allow communities to shape local environments through collective governance, based on empirical knowledge<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

<sup>2</sup> Rosa, M., Weiland, U., Ayres, P. and Jacobs, O. (2015). *Handmade urbanism*. Berlin, Jovis

<sup>3</sup> Heathcote, E. (2012). *A breath of fresh air for public spaces*; Available at: <http://www.ft.com/>

<sup>4</sup> Carr, S. (1992). *Public space*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Sennett, R. (1977) *The fall of public man*. New York : Knopf

<sup>6</sup> Ratti, C. and Claudel, M. (2015). *Open source architecture*. London: Thames and Hudson

## 1.5 The Big Society Agenda

An example of a collaborative planning framework in the United Kingdom is the Big Society agenda, set in 2011 by David Cameron. It aims to:

- Devote more power to communities for local development;
- Open up social services, for communities to innovatively co-produce services influencing their development;
- Promote social action, with individuals donating their time, resources and skills to support community development.

The Localism Act is set under the Big Society agenda. It is composed of different rights, these being:

- Right to Bid: gives communities priority to buy identified community assets, including public spaces, providing "support for the development of Community Shares to raise local money to finance community assets."<sup>7</sup>
- Right to Challenge: "allows voluntary and community groups, charities, social enterprises, parish councils, local and fire and rescue authority staff to bid to run authority services where they believe they can do so differently and better. This may be the whole service or part of a service."<sup>8</sup>
- Right to Build: "allows local communities to undertake small-scale, site-specific, community-led developments."<sup>9</sup>
- Neighbourhood planning: allows communities to have influence over decisions made on plans set by local Councils. "It must be stressed that the policies produced cannot block development that is already part of the Local Plan. What they can do is shape where that development will go and what it will look like."<sup>10</sup>
- Right to Reclaim Land: allows communities to ask that obsolete or underused land is reactivated through beneficial uses. This might involve change in land ownership, meaning that the community might be entitled to acquire obsolete land.

## 1.6 Grassroot Initiatives

Empowered communities driving local development and service co-production are characteristic of grassroot projects, which can be recognised as urban commons. Grassroot initiatives are set by citizens directly tackling issues affecting their communities. These originally emerged in southern hemisphere countries, where traditional and centralised planning tools proved incapable of offering dignified living conditions to deprived communities.

A prominent feature of grassroot projects and the urban commons is the space in which they are established: underused public spaces. It is collective action that transforms public spaces, initially with no influence on urban development, into terrains of creative community development.

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<sup>7</sup> Civil Exchange (2015) - *Whose Society? The Final Big Society Audit* [online] Available at: <http://www.civilexchange.org.uk/whose-society-the-final-big-society-audit>, p.16

<sup>8</sup> UK Government website: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/2010-to-2015-government-policy-localism/2010-to-2015-government-policy-localism#appendix-2-community-right-to-bid>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/2010-to-2015-government-policy-localism/2010-to-2015-government-policy-localism#appendix-2-community-right-to-build>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.rtpi.org.uk/planning-aid/neighbourhood-planning/what-is-neighbourhood-planning/>

## 2. The Urban Commons

### 2.1 A framework for the Urban Commons: the four essential elements

A thorough analysis of grassroots initiatives allowed establishing an indicative framework of the urban commons. This framework is composed of four essential elements, as exemplified on Figure 01:

1. **Public space** – characterised by openness. Must be accessible and flexible in use, to allow alternative modes of appropriation to emerge.
2. **Collective governance** – the urban commons depend on a collective and non-hierarchical governance structure.
3. **Hands-on action** – all urban commons are based upon hands-on activities that support local development. These result in tangible outcomes of service co-production. Learning is intertwined in the co-production process.
4. **Benefits** – community and urban development result from the repurposing of public space through collective governance and hands-on action. Benefits arise on the individual and collective level and can be translated into energy and food production, local economic development, skills and health enhancement - between others - and vary depending on the intentions set by commoners (the group governing an urban commons).

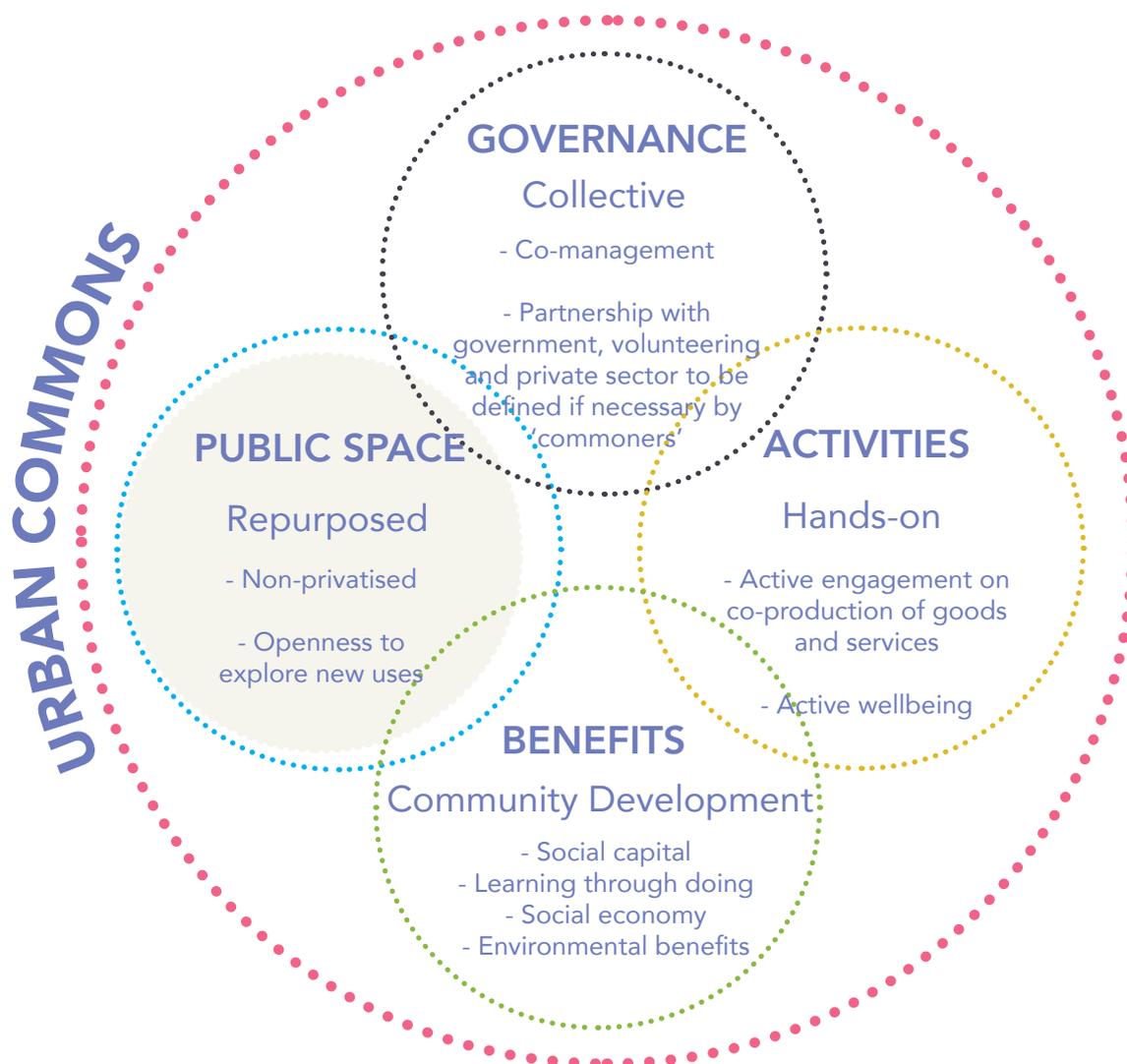


Figure 01: Urban commons framework. (Image: Sofia Croso Mazzuco)

The urban commons framework evidences public spaces' potential to becoming commonised. Academic discussions emphasize collective public space repurposing as a wise alternative to the limitations of centralised governance models<sup>11</sup>, counting on citizens' co-organisation to establish meaningful ways to co-belong in the city while addressing gaps in service provision.

Noting that public spaces can become a resource for urban development when transformed into urban commons is key to stimulating citizens, practitioners and policy-makers alike to pursue a new outlook on underused public spaces; it is also key to raise the alarm to the negative effects of its privatisation, impeding collective forms of appropriation to tackle alternative urban development.

## 2.2 Public Space x Urban Commons

Public space and urban commons differ, mainly, in terms of citizens' appropriation and its resulting benefits.

Public spaces are defined as "all places publicly owned or of public use, accessible and enjoyable by all for free and without a profit motive."<sup>12</sup>

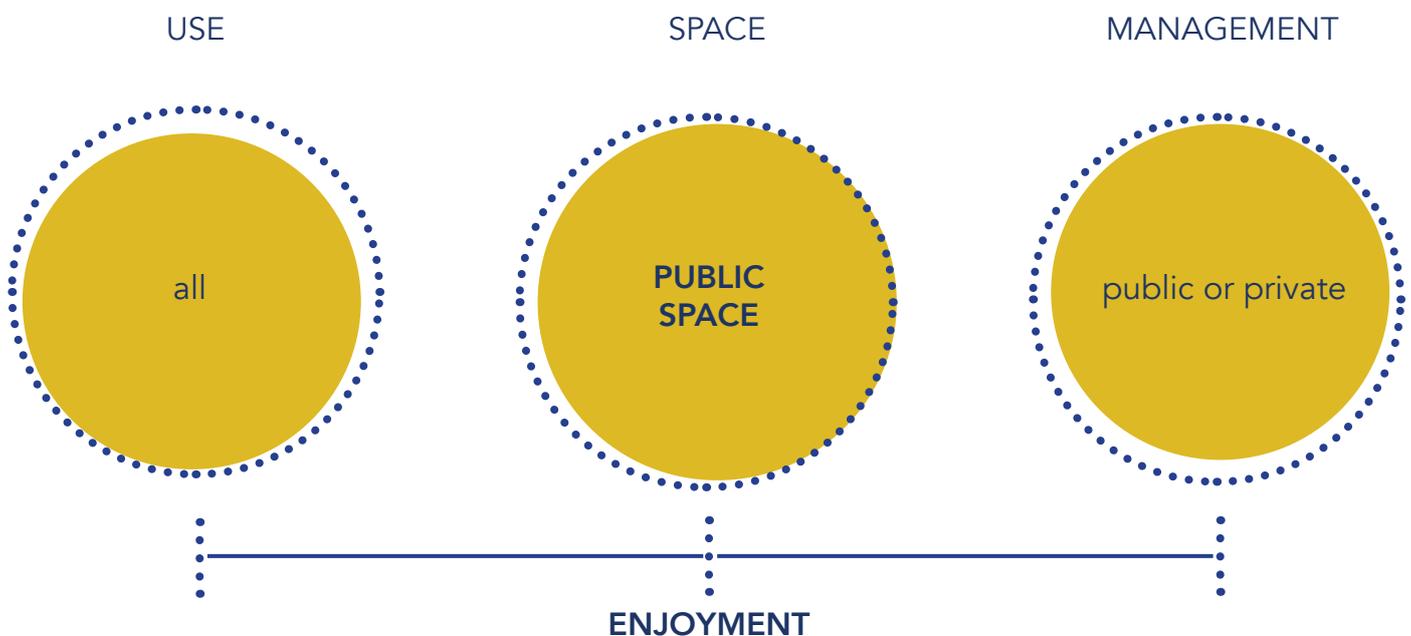


Figure 02: Public space use, management and outcome (Image: Sofia Croso Mazzuco)

<sup>11</sup> Koolhaas, R., Mau, B. and Sigler, J. (1995) *Whatever Happened to Urbanism*. in S,M,L,XL. Rotterdam: 010 Publ.

<sup>12</sup> Biennale Spazio Pubbico (2016) *Charter of Public Space*. Available at: [http://www.biennalespaziopubblico.it/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/CHARTER-OF-PUBLIC-SPACE\\_June-2013\\_pdf-.pdf](http://www.biennalespaziopubblico.it/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/CHARTER-OF-PUBLIC-SPACE_June-2013_pdf-.pdf) , p.1

Urban Commons “suggest a community of commoners that actively utilise and upkeep whatever it is that is being commoned, in the new social definition the term has taken on through grassroots projects and scholarly rethinking (...) common access has the potential to offer a richer form of interaction with the city than public ownership.”<sup>13</sup>



Figure 03: Urban commons use, management and outcome. (Image: Sofia Croso Mazzuco)

That said, not only ownership, accessibility and management articulate public space and urban commons distinctiveness, but mostly the value embedded on the appropriation process related to the urban commons.

“If we accept that common space is a type of space that simply has a different ownership status than public or private space, we miss the potentiality inherent in the process of space-commoning. More than an ownership status, space-as-commons is a set of social relations which potentially challenges the very foundations of ownership (...) In order for common space to be radically different from public and private space it needs to overspill the boundaries of any spatial taxonomy, whether this taxonomy is based on legal criteria (ownership, accessibility, etc), political criteria (forms of authority which control space) or economic criteria (value attributed to space by a certain historically embedded system of market relations). Common space can possibly best be described when it is contrastingly compared to private or public, but common space is essentially incommensurable with public and private.”<sup>14</sup>

The urban commons define innovative possibilities on public space articulating urban development.

<sup>13</sup> Bingham-Hall, J., Kaasa, A. (2016). *Future of Cities*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/future-of-cities-urban-commons-and-public-spaces>, p.2

<sup>14</sup> Stavrides, S. (2016). *Commons space: the city as commons*. London. ZED Books. p.261

## 2.3 Urban Commons and its openness

The urban commons framework can be divided into two streams: structure and action. Public space and collective governance define the structure, while hands-on action and emerging benefits define the action.

The structure stream requires enhanced attention, since the action stream could be flexibly adapted, depending on the aims that different communities set when reaching effective collaborative governance and recognising opportunities that local public spaces offer.

Public spaces and governance systems are, currently, predominantly managed through centralised control - communities feel they have no responsibility over local development. However, with grassroots initiatives signalling towards an openness direction, this scenario is gradually changing, and cities becoming more of collaborative scenarios.

The urban commons indicate an open and spontaneous - but structured - appropriation of public space. Still, the structuring of collaborative governance and community participation is a big challenge and a project in itself, requiring time and testing; there is no formula for it, since communities' development targets will widely vary.

Thus, the framework of the urban commons can be only partially defined, since its outcome depends on commoners' input. "Any specific community of commoners always has to devise rules for commoning practices to be regulated within its social and spatial boundaries." <sup>15</sup>

That said, the urban commons depend on a cohesive group language, but this group is open to newcomers: "...a community of commoners has to be open to its own transformation if those invited to participate in sharing are considered as equally responsible for creating and observing the commoning rules." Changes affecting the "shaping of the commoning rules" can operate, as long as the "precondition of sharing is kept alive: the sharing of power." <sup>16</sup>

The social tension upcoming from this negotiation of actions and governance of urban commons provides that "...common space cannot be fixed in the form of a product (no matter how collectively it was produced) because it keeps on producing those who produce it."<sup>17</sup> Moreover "... commons space is not an end product of commoning but, indivisibly a means and a shaping factor of commoning." <sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Stavrides, S., *Op Cit.*, p.271

<sup>16</sup> Stavrides, S., *Op Cit.*, p.260

<sup>17</sup> Stavrides, S., *Op Cit.*, p.260

<sup>18</sup> Stavrides, S., *Op Cit.*, p.266

This means that the urban commons is not only about sharing “the products of commoning” but also about shaping citizens as “subjects of sharing (...) who accept their incompleteness, subjects who accept that they can be transformed through sharing and subjects who recognize in sharing the power of opening to potential worlds, the power of encountering ever-new horizons of commoning (...) Collective subjects are thus being formed and transformed without everybody being reduced to fit perpetuated role taxonomies (...) “. 19

Relating to the social context and collective governance of the urban commons, accumulation of power and pre-definition of roles is something to be avoided. “Expanding commoning through institutions that prevent any accumulation of power is possibly the only social context that supports creative individuals in their non-hierarchical collaboration. Creative individuality may only thrive in and through commoning so long as commoning never ossifies in the enclosed reality or fantasy of a homogenised common world.” 20 (p.273, Common Space, Stavrides).

That said, the structure of the urban commons is ever fluid and collectively adaptable. Urban commons’ structural responsiveness supports and is supported by individuals contributing to shaping the commoning group and its collective aims, while being shaped back. This responsiveness and openness is a characteristic of the urban commons that cannot be grasped entirely due to the uniqueness of each urban commons.

### **3. UK collaborative planning context: possible future scenarios**

The Big Society (BS) agenda acknowledges the limitations of the centralised governance system in the UK and sets a collaborative planning model focused on the “potential for more locally-led innovation to address social issues.” 21

The BS reinforces that change must be driven by citizens and with government’s support, and is focused on: community empowerment, opening up public services, and social action.

It is crucial to understand the current UK planning context to better comprehend why the Big Society agenda was established. Public cuts in the UK are particularly being applied to the fields of planning, environmental services and cultural provision. Economic scarceness and the efforts towards adapting the centralised planning system could result in three possible scenarios in the upcoming years: 22

The wasteland, characterised by radical cuts in culture provision and parks/public space management;

The wild meadows, characterised by government withdrawing responsibility and giving emphasis to delivering few services, expecting citizens’ action to fulfil lacking provision;

The urban commons, counting with shared responsibility between government, communities and businesses to achieve alternative service provision.

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<sup>19</sup> Stavrides, S., *Op Cit.*, p.273

<sup>20</sup> Stavrides, S., *Op Cit.*, p.273

<sup>21</sup> Civil Exchange, *Op Cit.*, p.9

<sup>22</sup> Parker, S. (2014) *The Council and the Commons*. NLGN. Available at: <http://democracy.stratford.gov.uk/documents/s34896/TheCouncilandtheCommons.pdf>

“The common is an optimistic – some might say slightly utopian - future in which cuts are a catalyst not just for innovation in public services, but for the building of a stronger social and voluntary economy. If we are to have less government, then one way or another we will need a stronger society. A key question...is whether the wasteland, wild meadow and commons are really different trajectories...or whether they are actually a series of stages through which most councils are currently passing.”<sup>23</sup>

## 4. Gospel Oak

### 4.1 Urban context

Gospel Oak (GO) is a deprived community in north London, located within the boundaries managed by the Camden Council. It is defined by a collection of housing estate blocks, which are embraced by vast and underused public spaces. GO deprivation level is emphasised due to it being located adjacent to much wealthier neighbourhoods - such as Hampstead Heath, Kentish Town and Camden Town.

Local issues vary from social disruption, reflected on crime and anti-social behaviour, to a scattered local economy, reflected on its neglected high street and local street market - namely Queens Crescent and Queens Crescent Market.

Gospel Oak clearly shows traces of the ‘wasteland’ scenario, with poor administration and misuse of local public spaces.



Figure 04: Underused public spaces in Gospel Oak. (Image: Sofia Croso Mazzuco)

<sup>23</sup> Parker, S., *Op Cit.*, p.8

## 4.2 The Camden Plan: Regeneration for Gospel Oak

Gospel Oak was undergoing a regeneration process set by the Camden Council at the time of this study (2016). This plan, herein referred to as the Camden Plan, aimed for community participation in the establishment of regeneration priorities, following the aims of the Big Society agenda.

The priorities set on the Camden Plan are:

- Improvement of local public spaces;
- Community provision, including schools and community centres;
- Providing opportunities for jobs and enterprises to flourish, following provision of appropriate training;
- Improving Queen's Crescent appearance and shops;
- Investing in: community safety;
- Accessibility to and around Gospel Oak;
- Housing provision.

To fulfill the aim of 'community empowerment' set by the Big Society agenda, the Camden Plan development counted with community consultation in Gospel Oak to specify details of local regeneration priorities. This consultation process occurred via different mediums, including online survey, printed forms distributed to residents, engagement events and drop-in sessions. According to the Camden Council, the aim of this process was to:

- Raise awareness on the undergoing regeneration in Gospel Oak;
- Widen contact between the Camden Council and Gospel Oak residents;
- The Council having regular and reliable visible presence in the area;
- Endorse and develop existing priorities identified by the community through engagement activities;
- Encourage as many people to engage with the Camden Council as possible.<sup>24</sup>

As this process shows, the participatory approach being carried in the UK regards communities as passive participants in regeneration processes, since the empowerment proposition set by the BS got lost in translation by local Councils linking it solely to community consultation processes. This approach lacks a crucial element needed for effective collaborative regeneration: hands-on action.

That said, the current UK collaborative planning framework is based on a passive participation model where communities are invited to give their opinion but not encouraged as active participants of local development. Most of the regeneration proposals for Gospel Oak lack recognition of spatial issues being affected by social issues, and thus consider the community as a recipient of pre-defined solutions.

Clearly, there is a gap between government's intention to devote more power to communities and its actual achievement. "Despite their best intentions, governments have struggled to convert their 'empowerment' into long term change through widespread participation...but the ambition is still strong."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Camden Government website, Available at: [https://www.camden.gov.uk/ccm/cms-service/stream/asset/?asset\\_id=3460814&](https://www.camden.gov.uk/ccm/cms-service/stream/asset/?asset_id=3460814&)

<sup>25</sup> Britton, T (2015), *Designed to Scale*. [online] Available at: [https://issuu.com/participatorycity/docs/created\\_to\\_scale\\_v.1](https://issuu.com/participatorycity/docs/created_to_scale_v.1), p.22

## 5. Government vs Citizens: individual roles on collaborative planning model

The interface between government and citizens on collaborative planning contexts, both in the UK and abroad, is still very unclear. Both “appear stuck, asking each other to do more and more to fill the growing gaps between service provision.”<sup>26</sup>

Regarding citizens, “what is expected of him or her in ‘the new model’: a role as a volunteer, or as an employee, or employer in...say, a cooperative? Does the burden of caring for those dependent on care also lie with ‘active’ citizens – with a job – or only with ‘available’ citizens – without a job? Furthermore, there is confusion about the type of service and production that would qualify for the new model.”<sup>27</sup>

## 6. Hands-on collaborative planning models

Hands-on action is a crucial element for successful collaborative regeneration processes. It can tackle different levels of development, recognised as the “triple challenge”<sup>28</sup>. These levels are: individual, collective, and environmental.

A hands-on collaborative model makes citizens aware of their power to drive change, leading to social action. Social action means “taking steps to change the things that are wrong in our society and introducing new ideas and processes for doing things better in the future.”<sup>29</sup>

Hands-on action means communities coming forward not only with opinions but with actual regeneration strategies - from community organized action to implementation of collective ideas.

These active and collective pursuits enhance the social and educational value of public space throughout the whole regeneration process: from citizen organization to action itself and from space management to knowledge and provision emerging from hands-on action. Knowledge is developed from the hands-on doing and is intertwined in the socio-spatial organisation of the co-production process.

Hands-on collective action is also a needed element for service co-production, which is listed as a priority of the Big Society agenda. “Co-production is about moving away from the traditional mind-set whereby people with needs - the sick, the unemployed and the elderly - are ‘dealt with’ by professionals in a one-directional sense. Co-production not only recognises the right for everyone to have a voice in shaping how services are provided, but also that everyone has assets and expertise that can make that service provision more effective.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Britton, T., *Op Cit.*, p.22

<sup>27</sup> Moore, T. (2013) *Homo Cooperans*. Universiteit Utrecht. Available at: <http://www.ruralhistory.eu/newsletter/2013/rhn-2013-150>, p.25

<sup>28</sup> New Economic Foundation (2014), *Hands on communities*. Available at: [http://b.3cdn.net/nefoundation/fea0db02c5bc026584\\_kxm6i29hf.pdf](http://b.3cdn.net/nefoundation/fea0db02c5bc026584_kxm6i29hf.pdf), p.6

<sup>29</sup> Locality: communities ambitious for change. Available at: [locality.org.uk/our-work/social-action/what-is/](http://locality.org.uk/our-work/social-action/what-is/)

<sup>30</sup> New Economic Foundation, *Op Cit.*, p.48

## 6.1 Tactical Urbanism

A hands-on participatory strategy that evidences the value of hands-on action is a relatively new urban design process, coined as Tactical Urbanism (TU).<sup>31</sup>

TU relies on short span, low-cost, collective and DIY (do-it-yourself) actions, namely tactics, inspired by street artists; it is based on a 'build-measure-learn' approach that allows experimenting before implementing permanent spatial change.

Tactical Urbanism intends to integrate bottom-up and top-down planning by stimulating citizens and planning systems to engage together with tactics. This approach opposes long planning processes, usually dominated by planners and policy-makers, which are not always effective due to the inability to predict responses to untested urban interventions.

Tactical Urbanism is clearly a form of urban commoning due to its associated regeneration of public spaces through collaborative governance and hands-on action supporting citizens' active empowerment to drive local development.

## 6.2 A Hands-on collaborative model for the UK

If participation is to be transformed into empowerment, as aimed by the BS, it must embrace activities that encourage learning new skills and awareness of citizens' capability to drive development.

Empowerment is not something to be delivered; citizens must self-empower themselves, and governments should focus on planning policies supporting activities and infrastructure for active community empowerment - never abstaining from any responsibility in this process.

This is herein proposed through the transformation of Gospel Oak's underused spaces into urban commons.

Community-led development focusing on the transformation of underused public spaces into urban commons is proposed on the Alternative Regeneration Plan, herein presented.

## 7. Gospel Oak's Urban Commons: An Active Empowerment Proposition

### 7.1 Public Space Typology

The varied local underused public spaces are classified into different typologies to define a public space patchwork associated with Gospel Oak's Urban Commons, as follows:

- **Garages:** located on local housing estate blocks
- **Green areas:** surrounding housing estate blocks
- **Sports courts and paved surfaces**
- **Local streets**

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<sup>31</sup> Lydon, M. and Garcia, A. (2015). *Tactical urbanism*. New York: Island Press

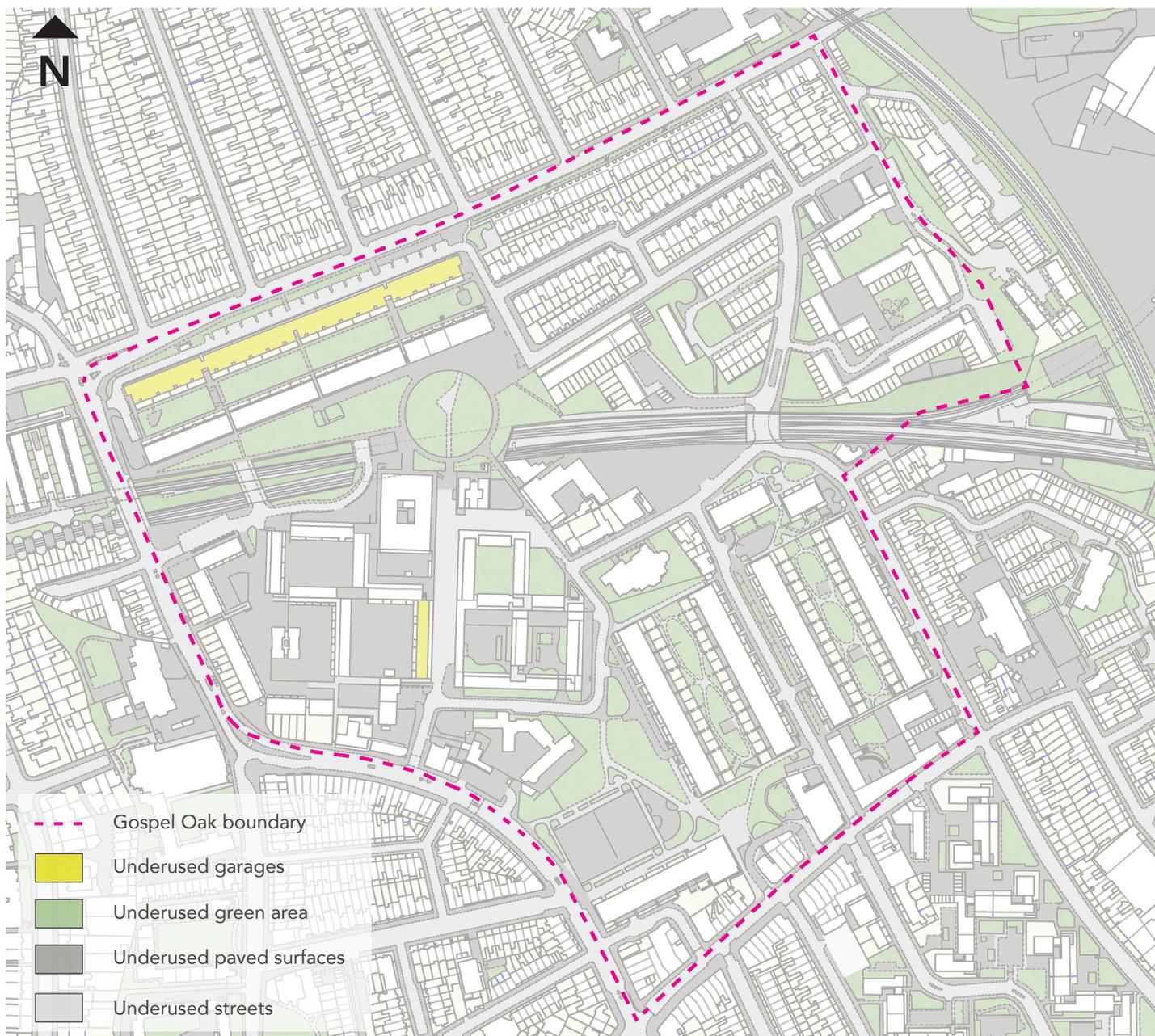


Figure 05: Underused public spaces in Gospel Oak. (Image developed using as a base map © Crown Copyright/database right 2016. An Ordnance Survey/EDINA supplied service)

## 7.2 Local Public Space Dynamics

During investigative site visits undertaken for the development of this research, Gospel Oak's public spaces were found nearly deserted, lacking public life and with only few residents in and out of shops on Queens Crescent. Occasionally, children and youngsters gathered on sports courts and green areas surrounding the housing estate blocks.

## 7.3 Community's Insights

Conversations and informal interviews with local residents during the site visits confirmed that people are not attracted to dwell on local public spaces, seen as impersonal and unsafe.

The lack of public life in Gospel Oak reflects the lack of social capital in the area. Social capital refers to "tangible assets [that] count for most in the daily lives of people: namely goodwill, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit."<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Hanifan, L. J. (1916). The rural school community center. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 67(1), p.130-138.

One of the interviewees, a lady in her forties living in the area for 35 years, lamented the lack of a public life 'culture'. For her, public life can be intensified if people become aware of alternative activities that could be set on public spaces. As an example, she explained that terraces on the housing estate apartments in Gospel Oak used to be used only for hanging clothes - until the day she decided to have a tea ceremony in her own terrace. The day after she did it, her neighbours started doing the same. This proved how important her action was to opening up potential alternative uses for that terraces.

Regarding Queens Crescent, the invasion of chain supermarkets on the area was blamed for influencing Queens Crescent Market decay. Originally being a distinctive food market, it now offers different products but lacks an identity.

During interview, a market trader pointed out the difficulties faced on his work routine reflecting on disagreements between traders - reinforcing the lack of social capital in the area. The market administration was regarded as another impediment to its success, with control bouncing between the Camden Council and the local community centre, with traders having no influence over any decision.

#### 7.4 Intended Hands-on Regeneration: Failure and Insights

Interviewees clarified issues affecting Gospel Oak through the lenses of the local community.

To tackle one of the main issues emphasised, namely the lack of social capital, I intended to explore the possibilities of public space to connect the community. The building of social capital was intended as the first step to ignite the possibility of a collaborative regeneration process.

The initial attempt towards this aim started through meeting neighbours during site visits; on one of the occasions, Morin, a resident of the area, invited me to participate in a community meeting to pose the idea of collective public space revival to other community members.

Invitation accepted. During the meeting suggestions were made by myself to co-organise an activity day to revive the local underused public spaces, providing the opportunity for neighbours to meet each other (a process which could gradually build the social capital needed to gradually establish the urban commons).

If the community was keen on participating on the activity day, the volunteering sector at UCL (University College London) would have provided the materials and funding needed to make it possible. The envisioned activities would be tailored for different interests and ages, like painting the floor with hopscotch games and having open air yoga classes, besides the provision of catering.

Nevertheless, the few community members present in the initial meeting had conflicting opinions about these suggestions, and some were even suspicious of such unusual idea.

At this moment, a striking insight hit me: people are not always willing to connect to other members of their community, even if an opportunity is given. It also became clear that, for the implementation of the urban commons, there is an urgent need to make communities aware that public spaces have the power to connect people; and to make communities aware that, only through a cohesive social language, communities can take changes into their hands.

These acknowledgements stimulated my reflection on how a collaborative regeneration process could be proposed in the UK to provide communities with this awareness - a brainstorming process that led to my reevaluation of the Camden Plan.

This brainstorming resulted in the proposal of an Alternative Plan based on the establishment of the urban commons in Gospel Oak.

## 8. The Alternative Regeneration Plan for Gospel Oak

The proposal for the urban commons developed herein is a constructive critique to the passive participation model operating in the UK.

Despite a passive participation model, the Camden Plan has some interesting propositions which are, herein, enriched by the Alternative Plan. Issues and potentials acknowledged through interviewees are widely taken into consideration on the Alternative Plan.

As emphasised, public space collective revival is the central element of the Alternative Plan. Priorities established on the Camden Plan will still be tackled, but now as a reflection of public space regeneration. This process aims to contribute to awareness of the value of public space and the urban commons to address thorough community development.

Four main elements extracted from the literature and case studies review are integrated to the Alternative Plan; these are: collaboration, social capital, learning, and awareness.

The Alternative Plan was structured dwelling on insights coming from analysing the Camden Plan, combined with conversations with local residents, and elements extracted from case studies and literature review. These are all combined to create the Alternative Plan, as shown on Figure 06.

Circus Art. This is the theme chosen to drive the Gospel Oak Alternative Plan, because of the valuable elements it embraces. Namely, it can be regarded as the most diverse art form, for having performance and visual elements, solo and collaborative activities, and an inviting dynamics that includes the audience as an active participant in the circus spectacle.

Camden Council	Community	Other Elements	Alternative Strategy
<p>POSSIBILITIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Activating garages as community and workshops spaces.</li> <li>- Improving Queen Crescent to attract more footfall.</li> <li>- Creating start-up spaces in local underused shops owned by the council.</li> <li>- Support trade of locally produced products on Queens Crescent Market.</li> <li>- Identify areas for market expansion, new businesses and training.</li> <li>- Identify opportunities to address anti-social behaviour through activities that support social capital.</li> </ul>	<p>POSSIBILITIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Suggesting new uses in public spaces to activate local social dynamic.</li> <li>- Using public space as a learning environment.</li> <li>- Identifying alternative and dynamic spaces for learning.</li> <li>- Testing new products on Queens Crescent Market by setting a more flexible license.</li> <li>- Limiting car access on Queens Crescent during market hours and beyond.</li> <li>- Setting up activities that address the issue of anti-social behaviour.</li> </ul>	<p>POSSIBILITIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learning While engaging on hands-on processes of making, testing and performing. </li> <li>- Awareness For the community on their power to lead change and on the value of public space for community development. </li> <li>- Social Capital Through learning and collaborating on community and public space regeneration. </li> <li>- Collaboration Between community, Camden Council, practitioners, private institutions and volunteering sector. </li> </ul>	 <p>Circus arts is the theme chosen to drive Gospel Oak regeneration, because of the different elements that are intertwined in its framework. It is the most diverse art form since it has performatic and visual elements, solo and collaborative activities and its dynamic invites the audience to participate in the spectacle as active participants.</p>

Figure 06: Combined strategy for Alternative Plan for Gospel Oak. (Image: Sofia Croso Mazzuco)

## 8.1 Stages & Public Space Typology Regarding the Alternative Plan

On the Alternative Plan, the different public space typologies are linked to different activities and regeneration stages regarding the transformation of these public space into urban commons - as shown on Figure 07.

Garages are set as 'production' spaces. They will host workshops where learning and artistic objects, related to circus arts, are engendered. Green areas, paved surfaces and streets are set as 'reflection' spaces, where the learning assimilated on workshops is applied to, and gradually reflected on the repurposing of local public spaces into urban commons.



Figure 07: Underused public space typology in Gospel Oak. (Image: Sofia Croso Mazzuco)

## 8.2 Theory of Change

The Alternative Plan for Gospel Oak is developed using the Theory of Change, a methodology that determines what outcomes a specific phase of a project intends to achieve in the short and long term, clarifying how the expected outcomes lead to the next project stage.

Since the Alternative Plan was not tested empirically, these stages are hypothetical.

### 8.3 Step I – Activating Underused Garages as Workshop Spaces

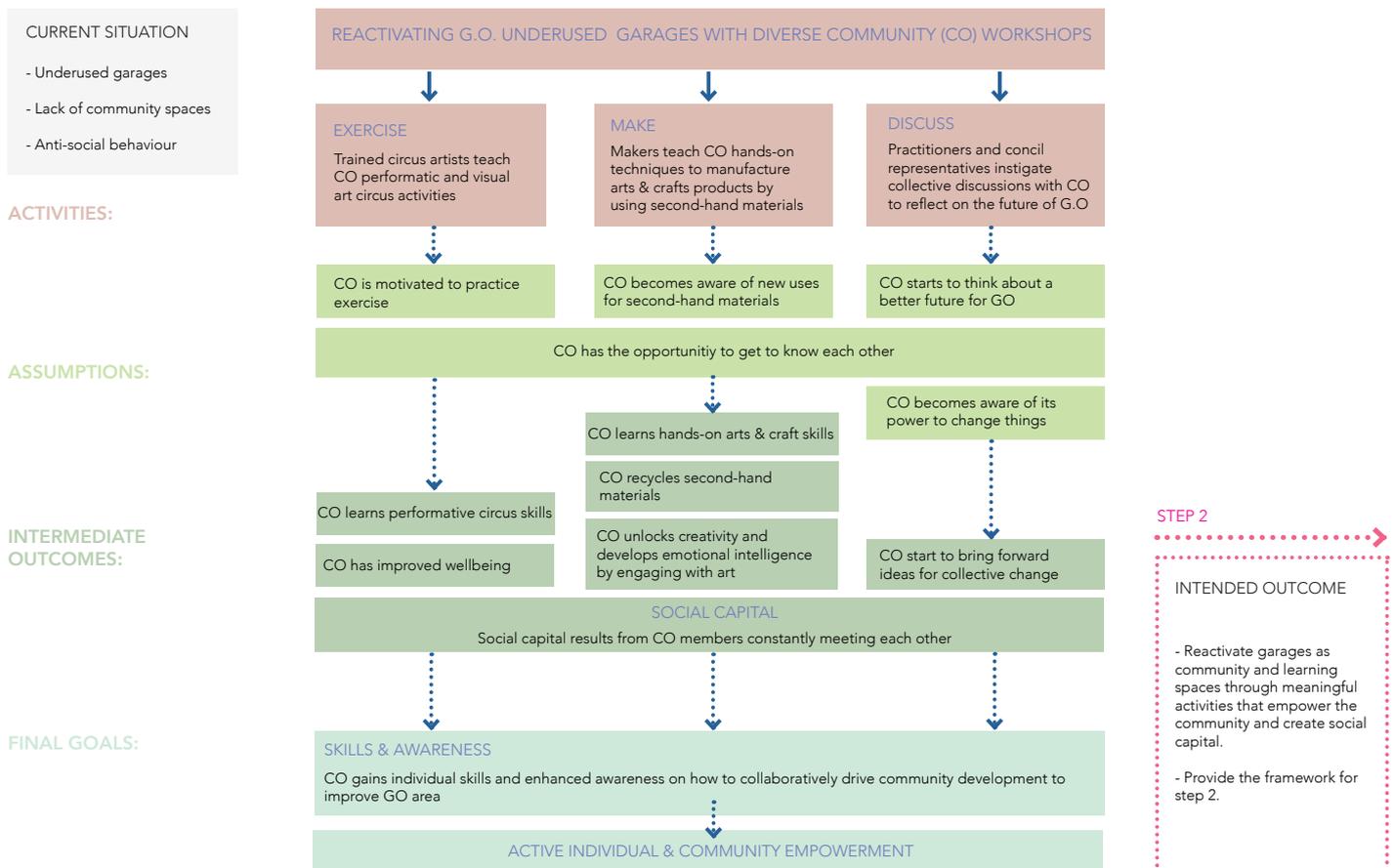


Figure 08: Theory of Change, Step I on Alternative Plan for Gospel Oak. (Image: Sofia Croso Mazzuco)

Changing the use of local garages is the first step of the Alternative Plan. Retrofitting is proposed through workshops on hands-on, circus related, activities, and through workshops targeting collaborative community development.

Hands-on workshops support individual development, through assimilation of new skills, and collective development, for strengthening social capital. The workshops are proposed through three streams: make, discuss, and perform.

For the make workshop, and perform workshop, circus artists would be volunteering to transmit their skills to the local community.

Volunteering circus artists transmitting their skills support a planning model counting with collaboration between different sectors, including volunteering work. Audits, from 2015, analysing the shortcomings of the Big Society agenda recommended that, to produce services in ways alternative to the free market - which is considered to work "against the Big Society"<sup>33</sup> - enhanced engagement between communities, governments, and the volunteering and private sector is required.

On the discuss workshop, Council representatives and urban practitioners would stimulate discussions leading to awareness on how public spaces linked to collaborative governance could drive community development.

<sup>33</sup> Civil Exchange, *Op Cit.*, p.62

Since Gospel Oak lacks social cohesion, which hinders the ability for the community to alone target local development, workshops would rely on initiators leading discussions.

The learning assimilated on workshops would empower residents with new skills and awareness enabling them to reflect, structure and drive community-led development. This learning becomes the backbone for establishing the urban commons, while enhancing local social cohesion.

## 'Perform' Workshop

The Perform Workshop, along with the make workshop, supports an active wellbeing model<sup>34</sup>, implying that health cannot be solely delivered as a service but must be actively seized by individuals. The assimilated learning is also beneficial for enabling job opportunities for the community.

In the Perform Workshop, activities are proposed on two streams: performance arts, and visual arts.

Performance arts include: dance, jugglery, tight-rope, music making, drama and clown, acrobatics, aerial tissue and unicycle.

Visual arts include: circus makeup, set design, costume design and stage lighting.

## 'Make' workshop

The 'make' workshop is based on the sustainable and hands-on local production of circus tools. Recyclable waste generated in Gospel Oak and second-hand materials will be repurposed by the community into circus tools.

This approach supports holistic sustainability (social, environmental, economical), benefitting the maker and the environment. Hands-on activities can lead to sustainability by "prosumerism or new materialism."<sup>35</sup>, defined as repurposing old tools instead of acquiring new ones. For 'prosumerism' to develop into a circular economy "people need to have the skills to look after and repair the things they own and communities need to have networks to promote these skills."<sup>36</sup>

Hand-made circus tools will be used for two main activities in Gospel Oak: community circus presentations, and activation of a social economy. The social economy will be set through commercialisation of locally made circus tools on Queens Crescent Market.

## Social Economy

Namely, a social (or civic) economy is aligned to the possibility of reimagining the urban in collaborative ways. Based on collaboration instead of competition, it combines "the spirit of entrepreneurship with the aspiration of civic renewal"<sup>37</sup> and emerges out of locally led initiatives aimed at addressing social, environmental and spatial issues. It acknowledges that the scarcity of environmental resources combined to acute social issues requires innovative and sustainable solutions, questioning the modus-operandi of current supply chains and enabling "citizens to be co-producers and investors instead of just consumers."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> New Economic Foundation, *Op Cit.*

<sup>35</sup> New Economic Foundation, *Op Cit.*, p.17

<sup>36</sup> New Economic Foundation, *Op Cit.*, p.17

<sup>37</sup> Ahrensbach, T. and Conway, A. (2012). *Compendium for the civic economy*. Haarlem: Trancity x Valiz., p.9

<sup>38</sup> Ahrensbach, T. and Conway, A., *Op Cit.*, p.15

Recycled circus tools to be fabricated during workshops include: juggling balls, juggling clubs, poi, circus plates, hula-hoops, aerial tissue, unicycle and musical instruments.

Little free libraries, to exchange books<sup>39</sup>, will also be assembled and set on public space to support an outdoor learning environment.

#### RECYCLED CIRCUS TOOLS

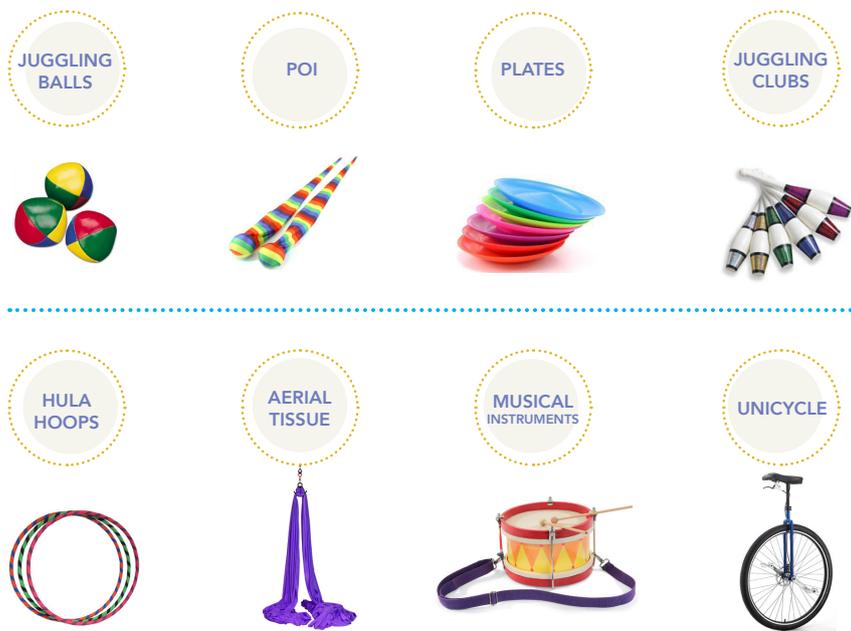


Figure 09: 'Make' Workshop - proposed circus tools for local production based on recycling second-hand resources. (Image: Sofia Croso Mazzuco)

### 'Discuss' Workshop

Community interviewees outlined issues affecting Gospel Oak and provided valuable insights that could only be transmitted through empirical knowledge.

The 'Discuss' Workshop will host discussions building upon empirical knowledge and the possibility of collective action. Workshops will be set via collaboration between the Camden Council, Gospel Oak community and urban designers.

The gathering of different levels of power in the same workshop can contribute to clarifying individual's' role and responsibilities on the collaborative planning model.

Also, clarification on the community power to lead change would instigate community leadership skills.

The 'Active Citizens' Programme (set in 2011 by the British Council, a non-governmental UK organisation) has a similar approach for supporting development of deprived communities.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> <https://littlefreelibrary.org/>

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.britishcouncil.org/active-citizens>

The programme trains community leaders as facilitators for local development, enabling them to collectively target community issues and come forward with a plan for community-led action.

Gospel Oak 'Discuss' Workshop counts with learning opportunities associated with the establishment of the urban commons.

Allowing communities to come forward with strategies for local development allows more empowerment than current 'Neighbourhood Planning' processes (operating through the Localism Act), where communities can only give opinion over decisions already pre-established by Local Councils.

### 8.4 Step II – Assimilated Skills Supporting Public Space Regeneration

The second step of the Alternative Plan requires residents' engagement with skills assimilated on the workshops to repurpose local underused public spaces - aiming for long-term collaborative development, as instigated during workshops.

Community development is enhanced through collective public space revival, igniting the strengthening of social capital.

Step II involves the continued improvement of community skills on circus related activities, and the activation of a social economy based on the circus art. The revenue of the social economy will be used for local community projects.

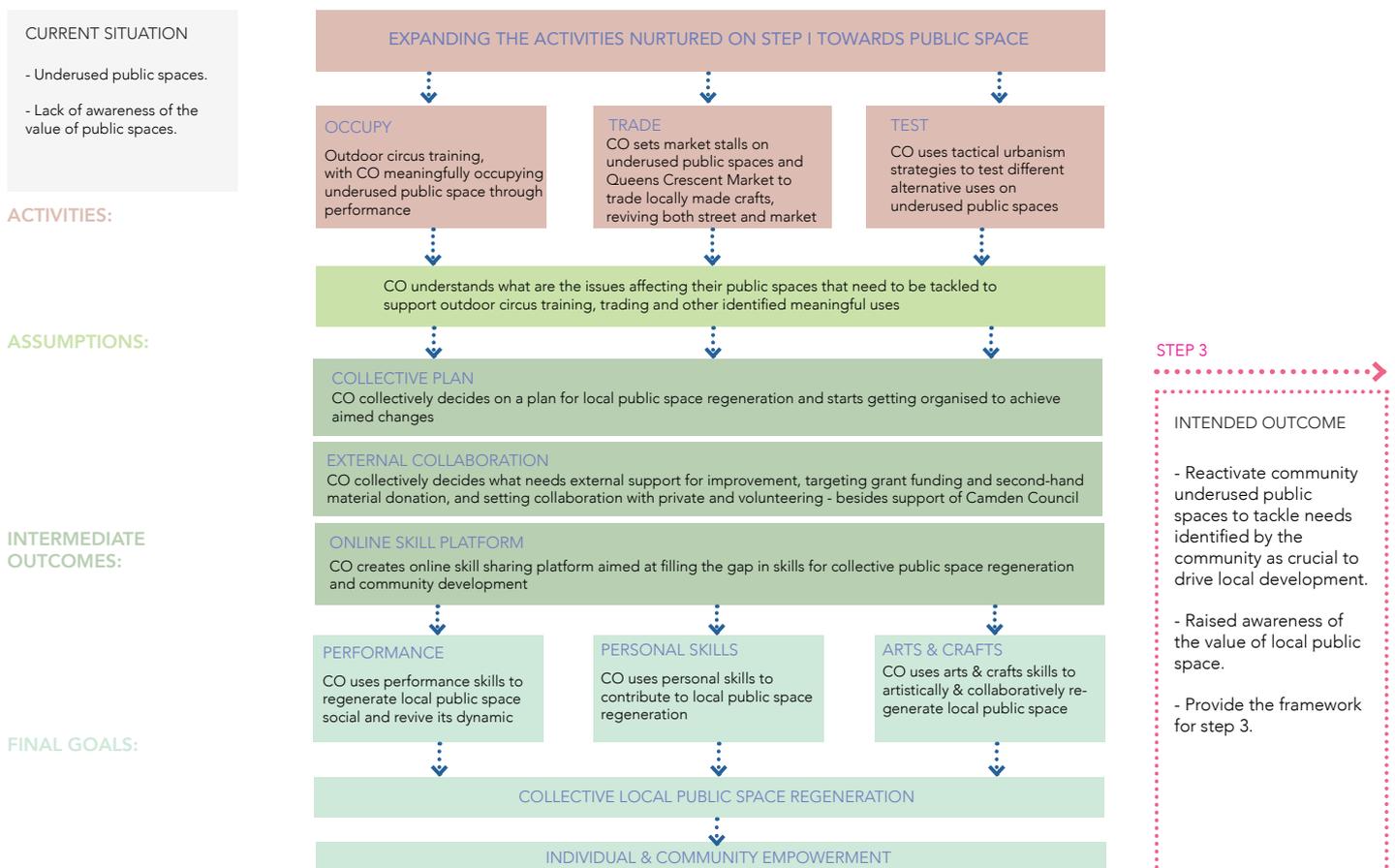


Figure 10: Theory of Change, Step II on Alternative Plan for Gospel Oak. (Image: Sofia Croso Mazzuco)

The identified local public space typology allows for different circus activities to be explored. Circus performance can easily be set on the natural environment, with trees giving support to hanging aerial fabric, tight-rope and lyre.



Figure 11: Collective regeneration of Gospel Oak underused public spaces through skills assimilated on workshops. (Image: Sofia Croso Mazzuco)

Revived public spaces would attract viewers and make of Gospel Oak a circus hub, with open and non-privatised public spaces offering an alternative cultural circuit. Local public spaces thus become a performance stage, featuring circus presentations, live music and the local circus' market, a revived Queens Crescent Market.

The community acting as street artists and 'tactical urbanists' can rely on the 'build-test-measure' approach to come forward with new ideas to regenerate public space.

Learning merges with training and performance while attracting outsiders to participate, passively or actively, in the repurposing of public spaces, reanimated by the lively performance of circus. This allows recapturing the lost value of public life.

The community, to upkeep the best environment for circus training, culture dissemination and local development, will manage local public spaces and coordinate the activities taking place therein.

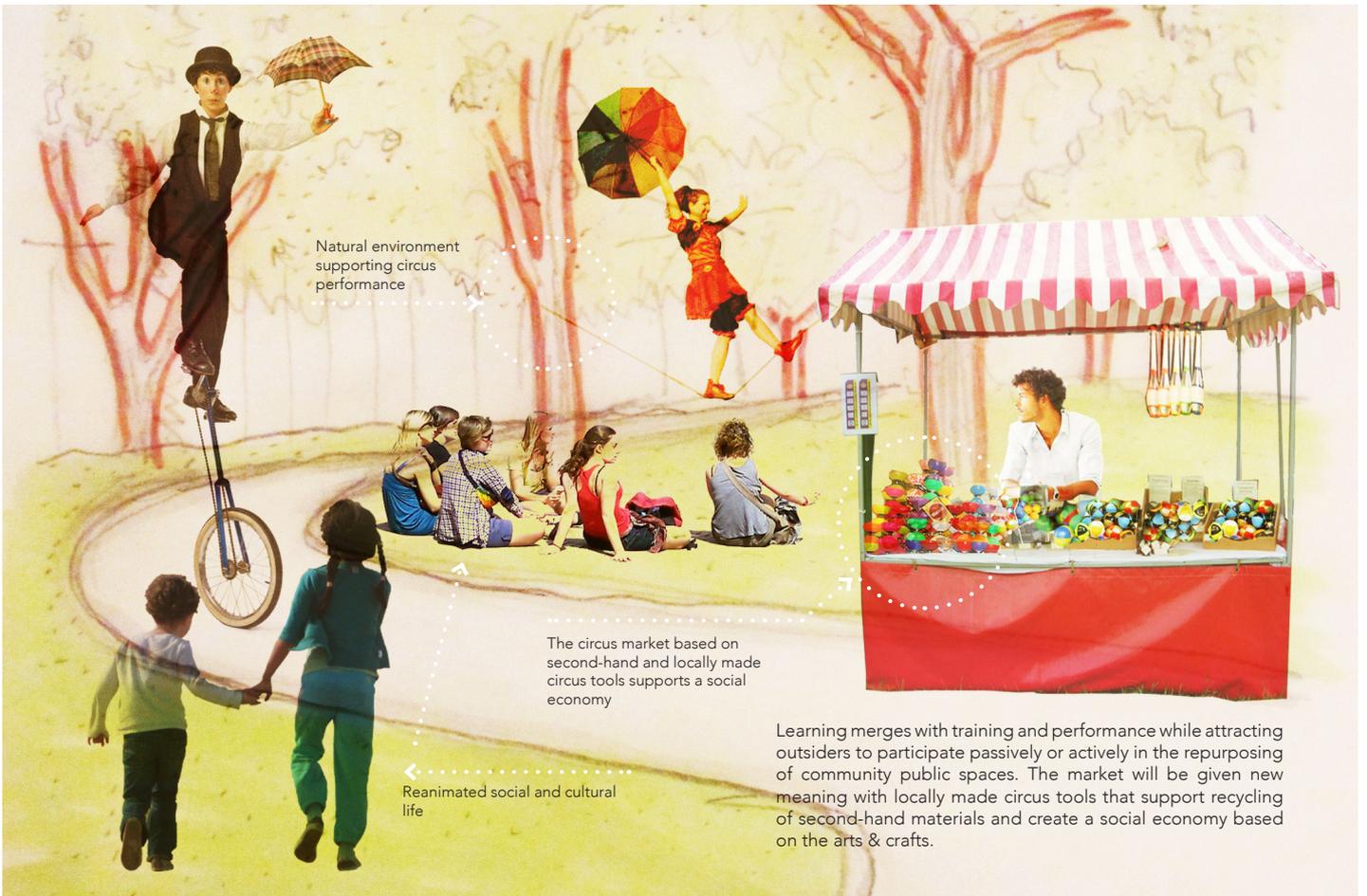


Figure 12: Collective regeneration of Gospel Oak underused public spaces through skills assimilated on workshops. Market stalls commercialising locally produced circus tools to drive the social economy. (Image: Sofia Croso Mazzucco)



Figure 13: Collective regeneration of Gospel Oak underused public spaces through skills assimilated on workshops. Public spaces as an open air learning environment for children. (Image: Sofia Croso Mazzucco)

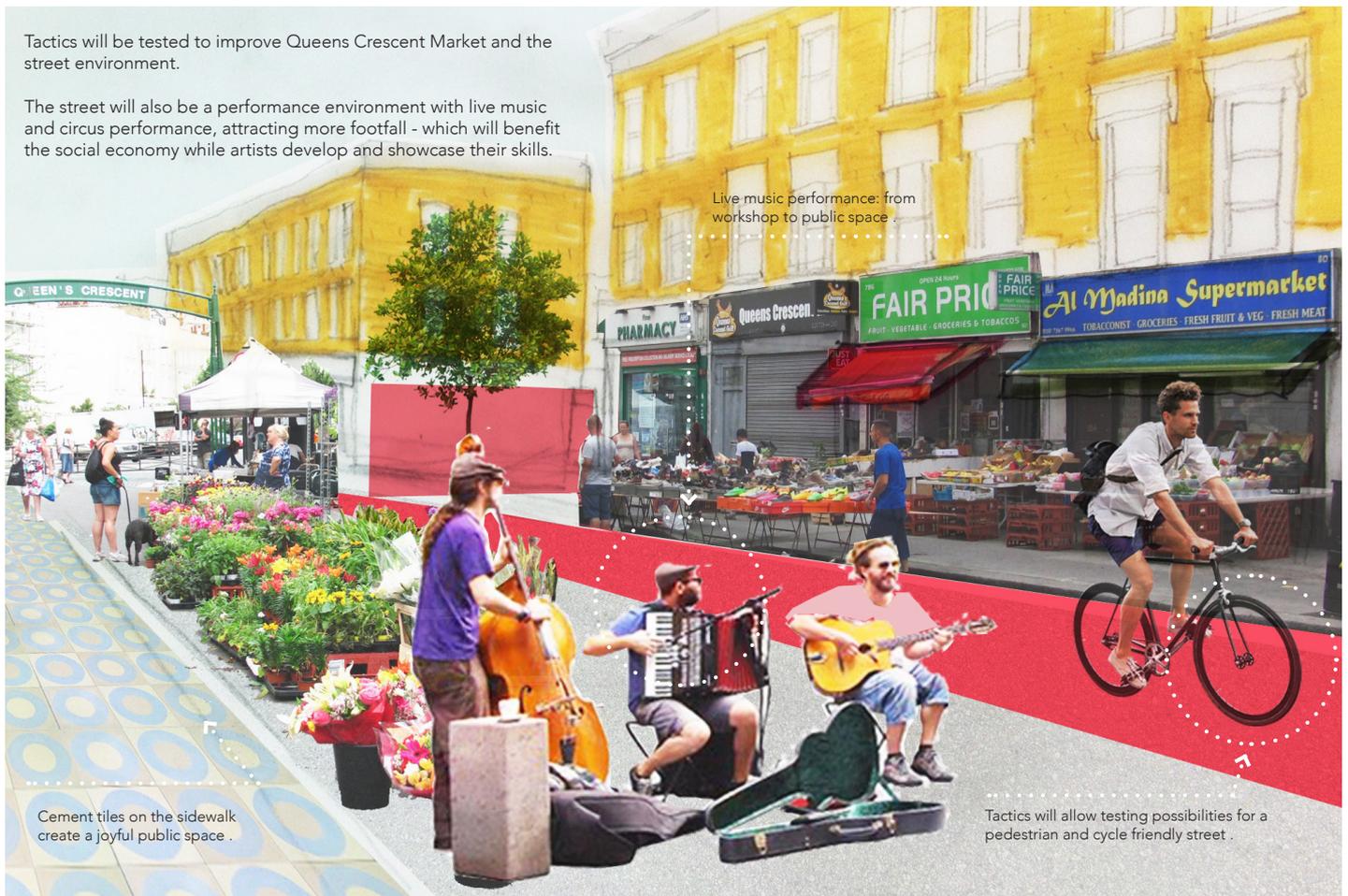


Figure 14: Collective regeneration of Gospel Oak underused public spaces through skills assimilated on workshops. Queens Crescent Market reanimated through the social economy based on circus art. (Image: Sofia Croso Mazzuco)

## Online Skills Sharing Platform

An online skill sharing platform is suggested as an accelerator for public space regeneration and community development. Gospel Oak Online Skill-Sharing Platform is destined for the community to organise local activities such as: reserving workshop spaces, setting circus presentations, offering materials for recycling on the 'make' workshop, exchanging personal skills, advertising books for exchange, and anything else that the community identifies as meaningful.

This platform is suggested seeing the development of a social economy counts with alternative means of service provision. The skill-sharing platform aims to reinforce local peer-to-peer support.

Skill-sharing and peer-to-peer support can drive development in environments of extreme disadvantage. An example in Africa is 'Kyangwali Refugee Settlement', a refugee camp, where women were initially trained by an NGO (P4T – Planning for Tomorrow Youth Organisation) on skills that enabled them to produce crafts to be commercialised. On a next stage, the women who received this knowledge co-shared their skills and engendered a domino-effect development process in the area, which helped them advance their situation.

<sup>41</sup> <https://challenges.openideo.com/challenge/refugee-education/research/community-skills-sharing-platform>

## 8.5 Step III – Formalising Gospel Oak’s Collaborative Structure

Every urban commons is based on specific goals set by commoners, with variations on the four underlying elements that support its framework - public space, collaborative governance, hands-on action, and emerging benefits.

Gospel Oak Urban Commons develops upon a varied local public space typology, through a network of commoning that supports different activities under the umbrella of circus arts. This framework is not an end in itself but a means for local development.



Figure 15: Gospel Oak Urban Commons framework. (Image: Sofia Croso Mazzuco)

The framework of the urban commons contextualised in Gospel Oak tackles local development while contributing to address wider issues affecting the UK planning system. It addresses issues resulting from public cuts on social provision. Figure 18 exemplifies this process.

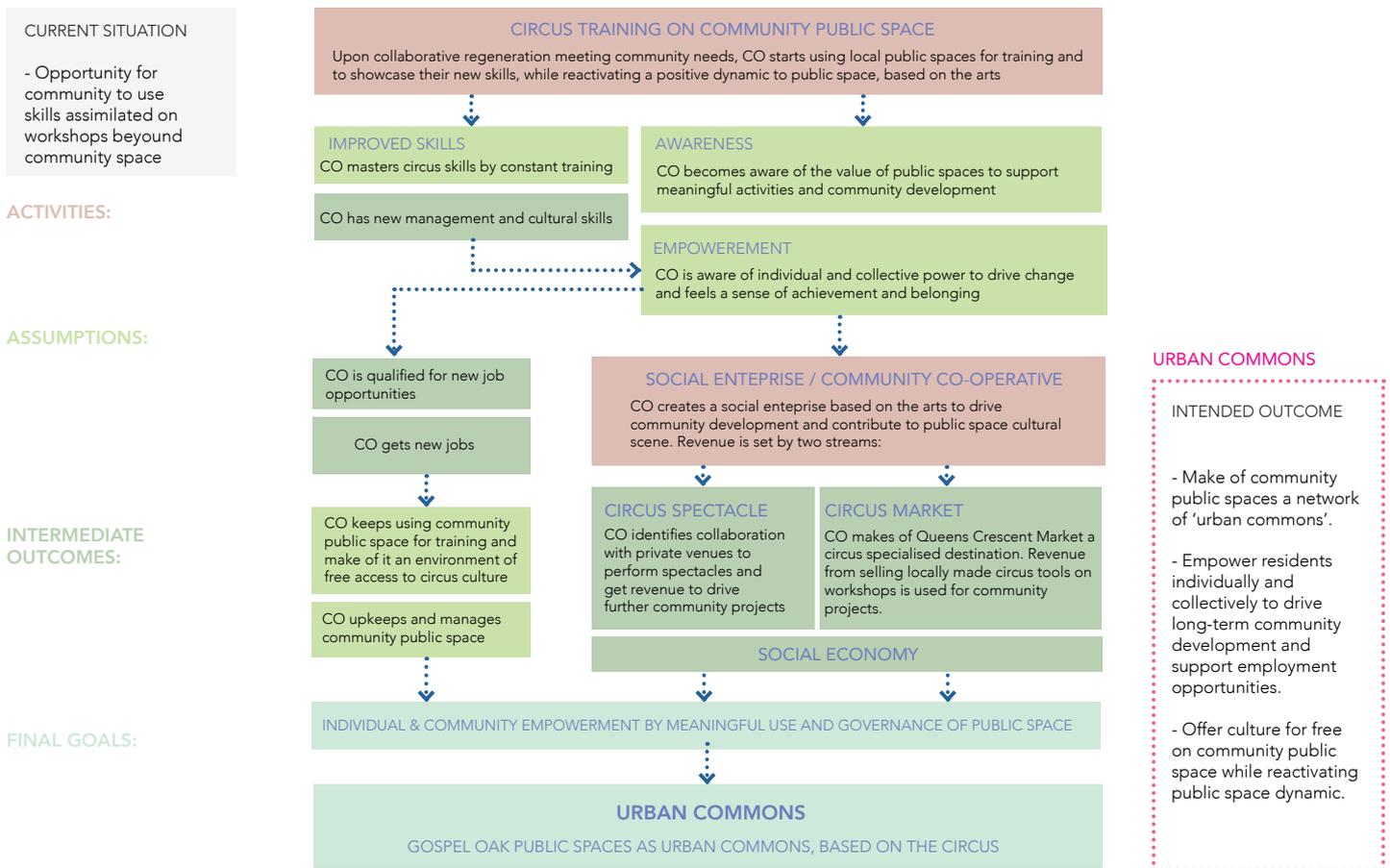


Figure 16: Theory of Change, Step III on Alternative Plan for Gospel Oak. (Image: Sofia Croso Mazzuco)

Despite the very local scale of the urban commons, it has the power to tackle issues that transcend not only its space but also time, via a structure that, if well commoned, will benefit generations to come.

Maintaining the urban commons is a condition for its long-term development.

There are two measures through which Gospel Oak's urban commons will be maintained. The first one will be the community making use of the 'Right to Bid', as set on the Localism Act, to protect public spaces as community assets.

The second measure to maintain Gospel Oak's urban commons would be the community setting up a social enterprise. Its definition is based on the outline provided by 'Co-Operative UK', shown on Figure 17.

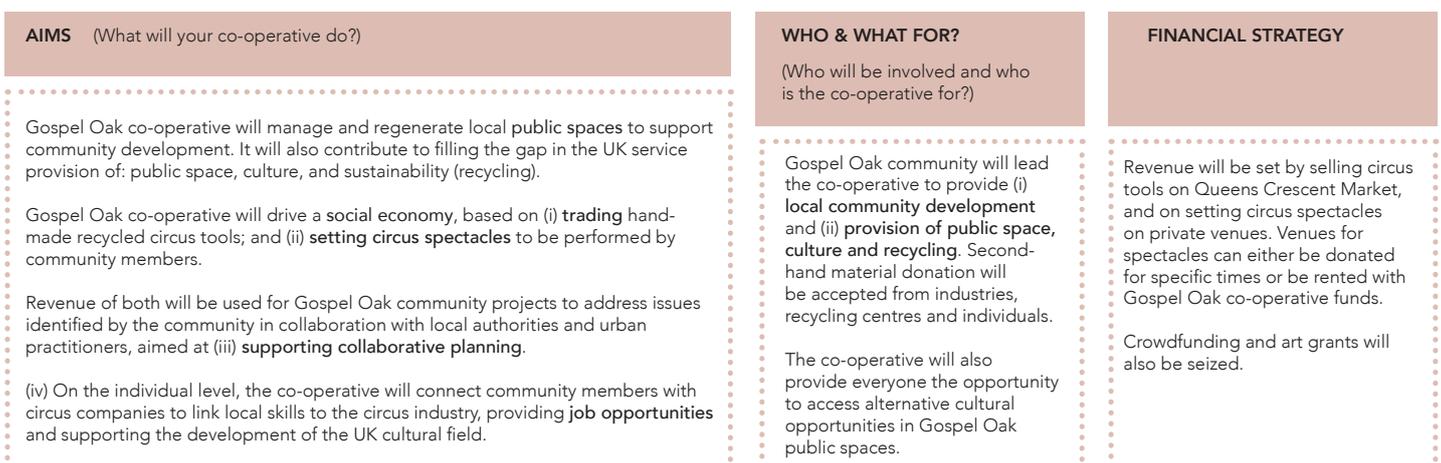


Figure 17: Gospel Oak Social Enterprise. (Image: Sofia Croso Mazzuco)

# FROM TACTICAL COMMUNITY REGENERATION TO STRATEGIC CONTRIBUTION TO UK PLANNING

providing public space, culture, and environmental awareness

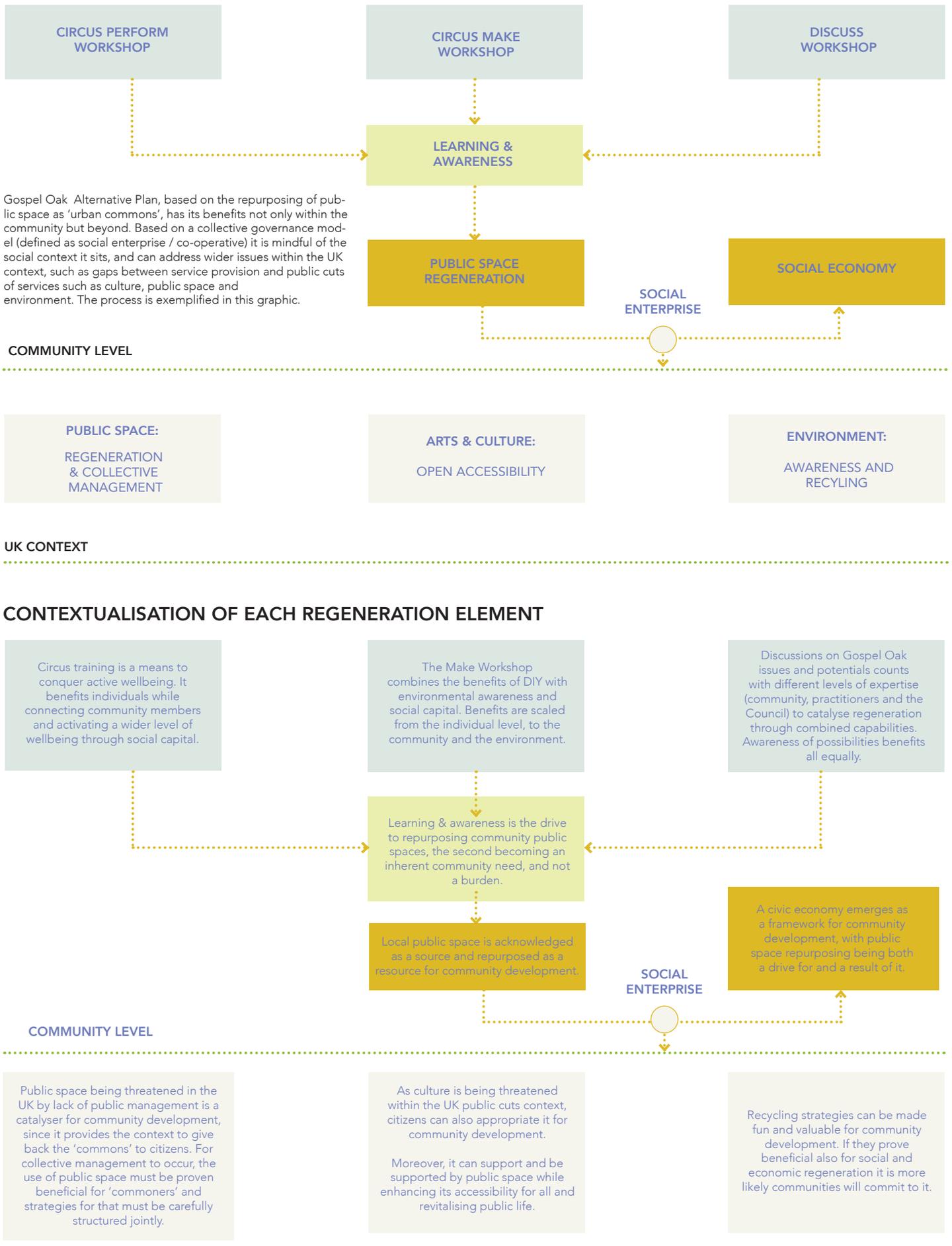


Figure 18: Gospel Oak Urban Commons contribution to UK planning system. (Image: Sofia Croso Mazzuco)

## 9. Ability of the Urban Commons to Tackle Different Issues at Varied Scales

Urban commons are valuable because of their ability to support active community empowerment and tackle issues on different levels – from individual to collective, from social to spatial, and from community to city scale. Its framework has the ability to address urban issues thoroughly, due to its spatial (public space regeneration) and social elements (collective governance, hands-on activities, and emerging benefits), thus tackling space while restoring social cohesion.

As exemplified, this occurs through a process based on hands-on collaboration and civic action, which for being active, supports learning, awareness and creative thinking. These contribute to remoulding the current passive participation model operating in the UK into an active empowerment proposition. Moreover, this process clarifies development possibilities linked to public space and collective governance.

The urban commons can inform collaborative development both at the local (community) and city scale (policy making), since the activities nurtured within it are imbued with awareness of the city as networked spaces, people and resources.

By suggesting to repurpose underused public space into urban commons through the revised regeneration plan for Gospel Oak, most of the initial aims set by the Camden Plan can be achieved, as shown on Figure 19. This occurs by public space being recognised as a source and repurposed as a resource for community development.

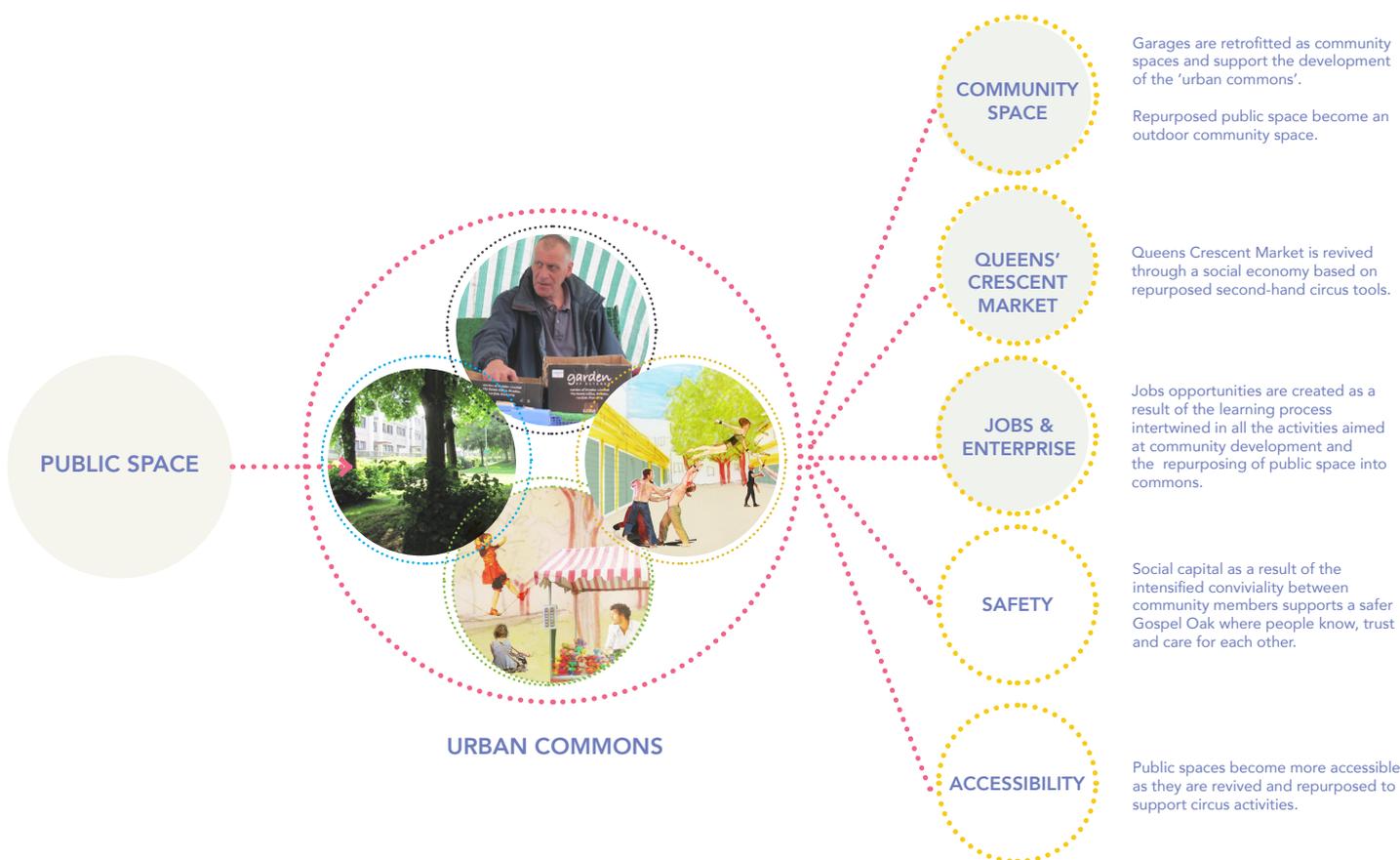


Figure 19: How public space repurposed into urban commons can tackle initial Camden Plan aims. (Image: Sofia Croso Mazzuco)

### 9.1 Inability to Thoroughly Predict Urban Commons Results

The circus proposal presented herein to repurpose Gospel Oak's underused public spaces illustrates one possibility based on the framework defined for the urban commons. Nonetheless, the details of this process cannot be thoroughly determined hypothetically, because they could only be shaped by commoners' input.

That said, the circus proposal is recognised as one but not the only option to support Gospel Oak's urban commons. In fact, a myriad of alternative processes could succeed, as long as the framework for the urban commons is seized – with public space alternative uses benefitting communities through collaborative governance and hands-on action.

This framework, partly structured and partly improvised, could revive the poesies inherent to public life and recall collaborative scenarios.

## **10. Informing the Value of the Urban Commons**

Public space being underused and underestimated in the UK by lack of public management can be a catalyser for its alternative use.

Still, for its collective governance to occur, alternative uses must prove beneficial to attract potential commoners. That said, the few who are aware about the power of the urban commons have a big responsibility in disseminating this awareness as much as possible.

Strategies to inform the power of the urban commons must be carefully structured to reach Councils, communities, urban practitioners, and both the private and the volunteering sector - so all sectors together can shape collaborative community development.

### **10.1 Awareness – Overcoming Limitations**

The main lesson extracted from this research is that one essential element is missing to drive a society based on collaboration: awareness.

Namely, there is lack of awareness on the value of public space, both as a source and a resource for urban development. This contributes to its underuse, lack of management, and over-privatisation.

Secondly, authorities must become aware that consultation processes being used in the UK do not achieve community empowerment.

Moreover, as emphasised, communities must be made aware of the value intertwined in the co-production process to engage in it.

Communities should also be aware of the wider context they sit in before influencing local regeneration strategies. Understanding how they can develop while addressing wider issues affecting society can stimulate cohesive decision making. This vision entails awareness on the city as a networked system - crucial to the establishment of the urban commons.

Awareness on responsibilities, capabilities and limitations regarding each party involved in the collaborative planning process is crucial for its advancement.

Last, but not least, awareness is more valuable than empowerment. Empowerment means nothing without awareness, while awareness can still lead to empowerment.

In conclusion, through questioning the modus-operandi of public life and collaborative planning processes taking place in the UK, this research brings awareness on how public spaces can be repurposed into urban commons.

The city as a patchwork of communities that support awareness through the urban commons - this will suffice for collaborative urban scenarios.

## 11. Conclusion

This paper proposes a model for the urban commons that signals to an alternative planning system where communities are actively empowered to assume responsibility over local development.

It is important to emphasise that community-driven action should not be led or supported by government's austerity, and should not result in it. As emphasised, the interface between government and communities must be well handled to articulate a positive dynamic between them.

The urban commons development model would imply government's support for communities to co-produce goods and services - which would directly impact on the supply chain system and enhance holistic sustainability - social, economic, and environmental. Governmental support to the common use of public space would drive a new public life and provision model, alternative to the "unsustainable model in which all necessities of urban survival are distanced from consumers by markets, corporations and public bodies."<sup>43</sup>

Despite its benefits, implementation of the urban commons development model, both on the community and city scale, has its challenges. Current challenges relate to: clarity on the interface between government and communities; means for structuring community engagement; capability to meaningfully appropriate public space; and clarification of the urban commons structure.

Moreover, for the urban commons to evolve, governmental thinking must be influenced through commoners creating a "cohesive language that defines ways in which the 'commons' can be organized, clarification on the values it unlocks and a clear working methodology."<sup>44</sup>

No initiative playing the role of informing the value of the urban commons was identified up to the time of this research, alarming to the need of overcoming this gap. Unless clarification of the urban commons occurs, both to communities and public bodies, public spaces will keep being underestimated and wasted.

This paper plays an important role for this clarification.

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<sup>42</sup> <http://www.uk.coop/>

<sup>43</sup> Bingham-Hall, J., Kaasa, A., *Op Cit.*, p.3

<sup>44</sup> Bingham-Hall, J., Kaasa, A., *Op Cit.*, p.3

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## Online resources:

- Camden Council: <http://www.camden.gov.uk/>
- UK Government: <https://www.gov.uk/>
- British Council: <https://www.britishcouncil.org/>
- Little free library: <https://littlefreelibrary.org/>
- Civil Exchange: <http://www.civilexchange.org.uk>
- Theatrum Mundi: <http://theatrum-mundi.org/>
- LSE Cities: <https://lsecities.net/>
- New Economic Foundation: <http://neweconomics.org/>
- Biennale Spazio Pubblico: <http://www.biennalespaziopubblico.it>
- Co-operatives UK: <http://www.uk.coop/>