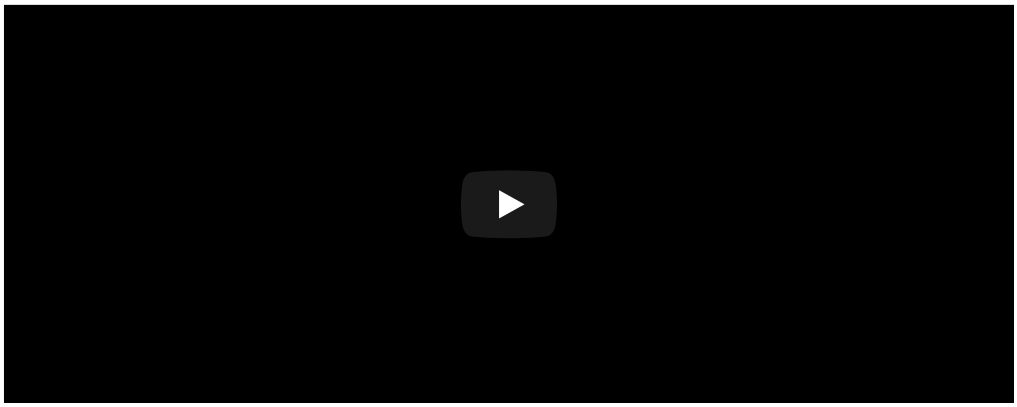
SoftHub

Year
2020

Project Director
Ed Parham

Partners
Useful Studio
Expedition Engineering



A design concept for local urban development that prioritises people and active mobility, keeps public transport for those most in need, moves workplaces back to high streets & enhances the performance of neighbourhood centres.

COVID-19 has shown that human behaviour changes can occur in cities without changing the underlying physical systems.

Remote working has enabled reductions in energy use, traffic, congestion and air pollution. By asking everyone to rely on virtual connections it has shown that it is possible to get by, but it has made explicit how important space is: the ability to work in a quiet area, have face-to-face conversations by chance, draw on the same piece of paper, walk to a park or nearby shop.

Covid has also shown that not everyone is lucky enough to have these choices. Not everyone has a job they can do from home, or the space at home to do it. Not everyone can cycle or walk to work instead of taking the bus. Not everyone can get to an outdoor space.

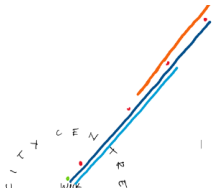
To try to maintain some of the positive changes, but also address the negative impacts, we have worked with Useful Studio and Expedition Engineering to develop a concept for local urban development that we are calling the ***SoftHub***.

The SoftHub concept is based on four key ideas:

1. Prioritise public transport for those most in need

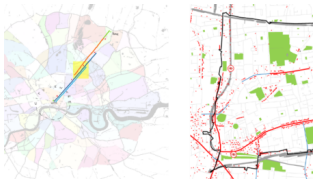
With reduced Public Transport capacity it is necessary to lower the number of journeys by bus, tram, tube or train.

We propose prioritising public transport for people who are less able to commute actively. For those who live further from city centres but still need to commute in, we have considered chaining together active and public modes where people may take the bus, tube or train part of the way, then switch to an alternative mode to (e-)cycle the last few kilometres.



Where these changes of transport happen creates opportunities – not just for amenities like cycle docks or bike repair shops, but places for (physically distanced) interaction or daily errands such as collecting parcels.

2. Create local shared workplaces



While some people are able to work remotely, not everyone can. Smaller-scale, shared workspaces – working to physical distancing allowances – could provide opportunities to work away from reduced capacity offices and away from home.

Vacant shops, unused units and potentially even outdoor space in SoftHubs could accommodate these and provide business rate income for Local Authorities.

3. Extend operating hours

Operating hours in SoftHubs could start earlier and finish later. Allowing shops or workplaces to do this will take pressure off transport systems at peak travel times. It will also create a lower, but more consistent level of activity across the day, and provide passing trade for local shops.

4. Re-prioritise the public realm

While many of these changes can be made through policy and operational shifts, interventions in the public realm of our streets are also needed.

Primarily this means re-prioritising them, first for people, then cyclists, public transport, and finally private car.

Depending on the specific location it could require extending pedestrian areas, improving cycle space, embedding public transport and clearly expressing where vehicles enter the space of another user group.

SoftHubs will benefit from streets and spaces that are greener, sheltered, and provide opportunities to stop and spend time. This could be done using quick, tactical interventions, or through more fundamental public space design.

Finally, deliveries should also be considered. Rather than allowing online deliveries to every door at any point in the day, deliveries for non-vulnerable population groups could be made to collection points in a SoftHub. This would reduce the amount of delivery vans circulating, making a more comfortable environment for pedestrian and cyclists of all ages, and freeing up road capacity for public transport.

Working across urban systems and scales

It is possible to both learn from the behaviour changes that COVID-19 has forced us into, and address some of the issues it has brought to light. To do this it means understanding how systems work together, across different scales, for different users.

The 20th century provides plenty of examples of unintended consequences where cities and infrastructure were designed with the best intentions, albeit around one issue. More recently similar mistakes have been repeated by prioritising a single city system over all others.

To enable positive change we need to look at interventions across many scales, and systems at the same time. SoftHub locations can be identified as the places where key public transport connections combine with walkable urban areas, within an active commute of a city centre.

The specific active transport provision can be tailored to characteristics of location, land use, and linkage. Specific opportunities for workspace types can be located and focussed to meet local demands. Understanding who to prioritise in different areas can be done by connecting these analyses to demographic and socio-economic datasets.

20th century planning and urbanism gave us macro-scale transport hubs in large, dedicated pieces of hard infrastructure. We still need these, and the SoftHub proposes to augment them by seeding the city with a human-scale set of facilities carefully planted in the streets and spaces of our existing urban areas.

Further information

Space Syntax Studio page
Details of our urban planning & building design services.

Space Syntax Consulting page
Details of our services supporting public & private sector clients in the creation of urban planning & building design strategies.