

Walsall's Way Ahead

Walsall Wayfinding Strategy Document

December 2011



This report has been produced by URBED and
United Creatives for Walsall Council

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PART 1: Introduction

Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council commissioned this Strategy using funding received from town centre investors. The document has been prepared by planning and design co-operative URBED, working with artists and branding specialists United Creatives.

This Wayfinding Strategy - 'Walsall's Way Ahead'
- reviews how people navigate the town centre.

We have looked at all stages of people's routes round town, from their approach and arrival to patterns of circulation, and assessed how to make way finding around central Walsall easier for all.

With footfall being the lifeblood of Walsall's retail core, the primary objective has been to support existing busy footfall routes, and open up underused ones.

The overarching aim is to help Walsall present its varied asset base as a more unified town centre offer.

The Strategy reviews different techniques for improving way finding. It then sets out what Walsall has to gain by embracing the concept, and provides an analysis of the town's challenges and opportunities.

Finally, it offers a localised strategy and action plan to guide action as resources become available.

We have based our ideas around the 'Clover-Leaf' shape that underlies the town's street map.

'Spatial artistry' can create a memorable town. Art can play the roles of 'orientation and information' - and also stimulation. In other words, it is both easy to naturally navigate the streets, and also to gain awareness of what makes the town tick.

We would like to thank the Steering Group of council officers and stakeholders from the College, Art Gallery and Manor Hospital.

Our work has also been informed by consultation with wider stakeholders in Walsall, including traders, businesses, West Midlands police and the general public.



Legible Glasgow
Lacock Gullam



Legible London
Lacock Gullam



WalkBrighton
Matt Cooper

PART 2: What is Way Finding?

Town centre way finding can be assisted by the traditional means of signage and clear maps.

On this page we show some excellent town centre maps from Glasgow, London, Brighton and elsewhere.

There are also subtler, imaginative approaches to assisting legibility through aesthetic and artistic interventions. These can assist sightlines, create memorable landmarks, link intuitive routes and help define character areas.

We have gathered some images of interesting artistic works designed to generate a stronger sense of place and orientation.

What should always be remembered is that well-designed towns tend to have good wayfinding 'built in'.

Historic streetscapes were conceived round the human scale, before maps were commonplace.

Townscapes often contained features able to guide and entice the traveller, such as a spire visible from the main route, an ornate inn on the main cross roads, and cheerfully striped canopies on the market.

Although urban policy quite literally 'lost its way' on such matters in the second half of the 20th century, there has been something of a rebirth in appreciation in the 21st.

Traditional town centres now realise they must compete and thrive against out-of-town and on-line retailers. They are looking again to what differentiates them and forms their unique selling proposition.

Part of the pleasure of a classic town centre like Walsall is the ability to walk and window shop, to explore and discover its historic gems and modern attractions, to meet friends and chat with strangers.

The experience of place matters – good wayfinding is essential to it.

For success, wayfinding needs to consider the dynamic processes of navigation and movement from the point of view of real people.

Where are the arrival and orientation points in the town?

What are the destinations people have in mind, and are there others they overlook?

What are the terms by which people read and understand Walsall – what are the signs and signals that place sends out?

Put simply, where and why is the decision made to continue, or turn back?

What can we do to urge people to make more linked trips round the town centre?

How can shoppers at the major retail parks and supermarkets be encouraged to visit the market and Victorian Arcade?

These are the kind of questions discussed with people whilst producing this study.

The next few pages look at some examples of wayfinding in different cities and towns.

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Spennymoor Letters
Ira Lightman & Dan Civico

The town can be seen as a work of art

If we think of the town as a text, we can look at how clear the 'letters and words' are, and also what their style, content and meaning says about the place.

In successful centres, the town is often treated as a work of art in its own right.

An initiative that inspired Walsall to adopt an imaginative approach to wayfinding was the Spennymoor Letters project in Sedgefield, County Durham.

Artist Ira Lightman was commissioned by Sedgefield Borough Council to produce ten visual poems for the town. She worked from texts produced by the local community to present a series of letter shaped sculptures that spell the name S-P-E-N-N-Y-M-O-O-R on the walls around the town.

Working in collaboration with designer Dan Civico the project was developed to create three gateway features which create a visual connection between the town's centre and its the major entry points.

HAYWARD
GALLERY

THAMES
PATH

SOUTH
WALK

Bankside

Caruso St John Architects

Good wayfinding should anticipate and accommodate the way people actually move around, rather than the way officials would prefer them to.

Footfall flows are analogous to water – they gravitate towards the most direct route from A to B. Wayfinding assistance is somewhat akin to irrigation. However, people have conscious agency water does not, and are much more resistant to being directed if it is inconvenient!

Signs can be embedded into the environment, not just ‘imposed’ upon it. A good example of this is the Bankside Directional Signage System project by the Walsall Gallery architects Caruso St. John. It forms part of a number of initiatives commissioned by the London Borough of Southwark to improve the quality of the public spaces and enhance accessibility in an area undergoing rapid regeneration.

‘To assist the increasing number of visitors and new populations coming into the area, directional signage was required along a network of prescribed routes, as well as information about

Signs can be embedded in environments

areas of special interest and current events.

The new system does not attempt to stamp a uniform signage identity on the area, considered inappropriate within the rich and varied context. Instead, a range of different media were employed. Working always with a consistent typography, directional information was located beneath new street name signs, recessed inspection covers, and on cast aluminium fingerpost signs. The design draws on history to form an integral part of the ambience of the public realm.’

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ICONIC SITE



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Iconic Site *Sans Façon*

Places that reveal their visual interest and heritage tend to be those confident in their own identity or 'character'.

Walsall certainly has real character, even if it is sometimes hidden or spoiled, for instance by routes that become unclear or uninviting, and elements that seem out of place. There is an ambivalence about the town's expression of character, with some parts like Leicester Street and the Civic Quarter being beautifully presented, while others such as Bradford Place seem shabby despite their innate beauty.

Walsall has a good historic architectural legacy to work with, and has rediscovered its confidence in recent architectural and cultural developments.

What is needed is a fresh look at the centre to read the signs it sends out, and how they are perceived by local people and visitors.

Canadian artists Sans Façon produced their 'Iconic Site' neon artwork as a temporary installation to highlight special urban elements in danger of being

Highlight architectural heritage as assets

overlooked. The sign was created as a response to the situation of many cities, where massive waves of new developments can completely change the face of our urban environment, often replacing the character of the place with hollow words and meaningless sentences presented only through the language of branding.



Soapworks
Sign Specialists

Signs can become works of art

Signage and artwork can of course be one and same thing. Walsall contains crafted traditional street signs that are works of art in their own right, as are some surviving shop fronts like the Taylor's Music Store.

A contemporary example of landmark signage can be seen in the low-energy LED light display created by the 'Sign Specialists' from Redditch, illuminating a chimney on the former Colgate-Palmolive factory in the heart of Salford.

The light feature is capable of being programmed to achieve an almost-infinite range of colours and sequences, and aims to create a 'beacon' visible from nearby road, rail and tram lines approaching the new Media City UK development.

The design of the lettering is subtly reminiscent of the old Colgate-Palmolive logo, now applied to a regeneration project as a key symbol of revival.



 urbec

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A BIRMI

'Let's Colour' Project, Paris
Dulux Paints, Local People

Buildings can act as landmarks

Buildings themselves, or parts of them, can act as signs and landmarks. The obvious historic examples are deliberately prominent buildings like St. Matthew's spire and the Town Hall tower.

Industrial heritage built for utilitarian purposes like the Majorfax chimney and BOAK Tower can become useful landmarks through familiarity.

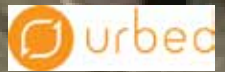
Sometimes, even structures considered ugly 'eye-sores' can be revived as pieces of positive wayfinding. The 'Let's Colour' project, privately funded by Dulux Paints as a promotional and corporate social responsibility initiative, has demonstrated just such an effect.

The community focused project has seen car parks, schools, streets and squares transformed from dull, oppressive, grey spaces into areas of vivid colour. This demonstrates how transformative relatively low cost and simple interventions can be, especially when they develop a genuine affinity and involvement with local people.



Favela Painting

Haas & Hahn



Favela Paintin
Haas & Hahn

Public art can encompass huge areas

Some public art goes even beyond the scale of individual buildings, to encompass whole areas of a city.

In 2006, the Dutch artist duo *Haas & Hahn*, fired by a mission to bring outrageous art to the most unexpected places, started developing the idea of creating community-driven art interventions in some of the Brazil.

Their efforts yielded two murals, which were painted in Vila Cruzeiro, Rio's 'most notorious slum', in collaboration with local youth.

The artworks received worldwide coverage and have become points of pride in the community and throughout Rio.

These inspiring, large scale works show that large scale artistic initiatives with enormous 'place-making' impact can be undertaken with popular support, even with limited funding.



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Hope Street Project

Peter Appleton

Wayfinding comes naturally where people have their own clear 'mind map' of the place they are trying to navigate.

The Hope Street Project sparked an innovative art installation which emphasised particular landmarks and paths across an entire city district, the Hope Street Quarter.

It linked the Liverpool's two iconic Cathedrals during September and November of the city's year as European Capital of Culture in 2008. The project used two lasers - one visible during hours of dusk and darkness, and the second an invisible beam carrying voices and sounds between the two Cathedrals.

Memorable cues in various forms build up to create 'legibility' of a place. A seminal text on this subject is Kevin Lynch's famous book 'The Image of the City'. It cites five factors that make up the image or readability of a place:

Wayfinding should come naturally

Landmarks

Static and recognisable objects which can be used as fixed points of reference to give a sense of location and bearing – these could be street signs, places of worship, distinctive buildings, chimneys etc.

Districts

Areas with a distinct character which provides coherence, such as a particular urban quarter or neighbourhood.

Paths

Channels through which a person moves and observes – obviously includes streets but could also be towpaths, shopping malls etc.

Nodes

Places of focus and concentration of activity like busy street corners, stations, public squares and parks.

Edges

Dividing lines that act as a break in continuity, such as a railway cutting, busy ring road or wide-open space.



Map

Aram Bartholl

We now inhabit 'virtual spaces' as well as the physical space of the town.

This has profound implications for wayfinding, both positive and negative. For one thing it puts town centres under competition from online retailing and service delivery. But it also means they can promote their values to a potentially global audience.

More specifically, it means towns need to consider how mapping and other information is presented in electronic form, especially on highly mobile devices like smart-phones, net-books and tablets.

German artist Aram Bartholl has explored these transitions from the virtual to the physical: his public art works include giant real-life versions of Google's red map markers positioned in public spaces; and animated neon chevrons of the kind used to guide players round circuits in racing games.

The virtual world must be connected



Urban Cursor Project *Sebastian Campion*

People can engage with mapping

Danish designed Sebastian Campion has explored how the relationship from virtual to physical may become reflexive, with the two domains evolving as they act on one another.

His Urban Cursor Project featured a familiar computer generated object, an oversized 3-dimensional computer cursor (pointer).

The cursor was placed as a moveable bench on a square in Figueres, Catalunya during the cultural festival 'Ingràvid'. Here, people could touch it, move it around and sit on it as an alternative to conventional benches.

Via an embedded GPS device, the cursor transmitted its geographic coordinates to a website. As people moved it round, sometimes to nearby streets and squares, the coordinates were mapped in Google Maps.

This documented the cursor's movements in the physical world, allowing the public to see how they collectively shaped its location.



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You Are Here *Sans Façon*

Sans Façon played with traditional wayfinding methods with their installation 'You are Here', first used to highlight the opening of the National Museum of Waterways in Swansea.

In response to the traditional brief proposing to use art installations to attract visitors from the car park to the highly visible new museum, their approach was self consciously light hearted.

Drawing attention to the building in the most unequivocal form, 'You are Here' references the classic 'big red arrow' ubiquitously found on wayfinding maps worldwide to describe the observer's location.

It functioned as an attraction visible throughout the wider city and around the bay, bringing this new building into the wider collective consciousness.

Walsall could use similarly quirky, low cost yet highly visible techniques, which command attention yet continue to surprise and delight.

Highly visible installations are effective



Spider and Cobweb

Ai WeiWei

China's most famous artist Ai WeiWei graced a public square in Liverpool with his stunning illuminated installation 'Spider and Cobweb'.

This transformed a rather lifeless and formal space behind the city's Georgian Town Hall into a permanently crowded arena of spectacle and mystique.

In terms of Lynch's 'Image of the City', a new node was effectively created adjacent to one of Liverpool's foremost civic landmarks, instantly becoming a 'must see' destination in its own right and an anchor point on people's internal map of the city.

Although the work was sadly only temporary, its influence is still felt among all who witnessed this giant structure and its arachnid inhabitant.

New nodes can be created with art



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PART 3: What's in it for Walsall?

There have been significant improvements in Walsall, and wayfinding can be a way to help to adapt to changes.

Walsall town centre has enjoyed significant investment and regeneration over the last decade, with millions of pounds spent on redevelopment across its retail, cultural, educational, health, transport, leisure and commercial sectors.

Its pedestrian movement infrastructure has only partly adapted to opportunities offered by these major changes.

We believe footfall, trade and well-being across the centre will further improve if established and emerging amenities are better connected to one another.

This can be achieved with relatively modest financial outlay - some significant improvements may indeed cost very little yet have very high impact.

We also believe Walsall has a strong underlying spatial structure, with key streets and quarters arranged in the 'clover-leaf' shape potentially ideal to maximise footfall circuits and trading opportunities.

By emphasising this clover-leaf shape of cross roads and four clear urban quarters we can make Walsall town centre more memorable and easy to navigate.

This strong 'mind map' will encourage visitors to feel comfortable and confident to explore more of the town, uncovering its hidden gems.



Crown Wharf

Tesco

Primark & Co-Op

ASDA

Connecting new retail areas...

Many thousands of square feet of new retail floorspace have been delivered within the town centre and around its edge in recent years – a far more desirable outcome than the proliferation of out of town retail parks seen a decade or two ago, which all but killed off many traditional high streets.

All the new stores in central Walsall are within east walking distance of Park Street and the market, making linked trips easy in principle.

In practice, the pedestrian and wayfinding infrastructure has not fully evolved to take full advantage of this opportunity.

Crown Wharf is partially separated from Gallery Square by over engineered highway infrastructure, including railings and a high central reservation. This strategy suggests a far better pedestrian crossing along with other wayfinding interventions to help the town centre shops capture more of the trade attracted by the retail park, and vice versa.

Tesco is much better configured thanks to good urban design input from the planning authority,

with a high quality ‘shared space’ connecting the new College and Leather Museum. This new configuration is let down at its interface with St. Paul’s street and Town End, where blank walls and clutter face shoppers and students. The Strategy advocates artistic and crossing improvements to reinforce this link and encourage people over this threshold to the high street area.

Encouraging Primark and the Co-Op to open new town centre stores is good news in terms of boosting footfall and anchoring the fashion, footwear and convenience offer. Their central location near ‘the Bridge’ will help street vitality and should boost overall trade around the core.

The ASDA store in St. Mathew’s is well designed for a big-box store, retaining an active entrance and some urban enclosure onto the mediaeval High Street.

The public realm here needs upgrading to encourage more activity on the street – a good start has been made by removal of the Overstrand bridge, which blocked sightlines to the landmark church spire, and to ASDA itself.



Walsall Railway Station



Crown Wharf Car Park

College Car Park

Tesco Car Park

WMBC Multi Storey

Walsall Bus Station

Morrisons Car Park

The Saddler Centre Car Park

Surface Car Park

Bradford Place Bus Station

Market Multi Storey

ASDA Car Park

Arrival points

Parking is an issue in Walsall, as it is in many towns, but there is at least substantial capacity here, much of it in dedicated multi-storey facilities rather than low density surface parking.

A common complaint during consultations centred on the difficulty of locating a parking space and the confusing central road layout, which sweeps traffic around the town centre efficiently but doesn't always make it easy to visit.

Pedestrian links from the car parks are mixed in quality, and wayfinding information for visitors tends to be minimal.

The story is similar at the key public transport interchanges, the railway station, Bus Station and Bradford Place. Happily, they are very centrally located, just a minute's walk from the main retail core on Park Street. However, these busy facilities are currently not well-marked from the Park Street retail core. As with the car parks, they do not offer visitors to the town a good welcome in terms of wayfinding maps and information, although the main Bus Station does incorporate a well-used and helpful staffed visitor centre.

The Strategy recommends links to and from key arrival points are addressed with intelligently placed signage, artwork and a clear, consistent town centre mapping system in the places suggested. Park Street Arcade, Station Street, Butlers Passage and Bradford Place all need attention to improve their impact as pedestrian gateways.

Caparo Site

Canalside

Bradford St



New housing

Another recent success in the town's regeneration has been the reintroduction of town centre living in the core area around the waterfront, with further housing expected on large canalside sites towards Birchills.

Of course, the many residents in established edge of centre communities like St. Mathew's, Chuckery, Caldmore, Birchills, Stafford Street and Pleck have long appreciated their proximity to town centre amenities within walking distance. Living within a short distance of the workplace is a long Black Country tradition, and many employees within central Walsall live locally.

Heavy traffic infrastructure around the ring road does not always encourage easy access on foot for these communities – a case in point being the excessive time taken to negotiate the various crossing phases at the Arboretum junction.

Wayfinding needs to consider local inhabitants too and not take their trade for granted – walk-up trade accounts for a significant percentage of Walsall's retail economy.

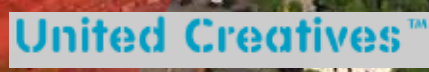
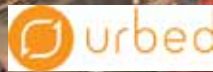


Manor Hospital

The College

Arboretum

Gallery



New civic assets

The extent of investment in civic and cultural assets over the last decade is impressive when reviewed in total. As well as the exquisite New Art Gallery, an instant modern classic that gained Walsall nationwide admiration, the town has completely renewed its main Hospital, College and public park, the Arboretum.

For these public investments to play their full part in the town's renaissance, they need to be seamlessly connected.

The Gallery

Visible from much of the main shopping street, with especially good views from the market area along 'Digbeth'. The balcony space on top of the Gallery affords stunning vistas across Walsall and the wider Black Country, and is itself highly prominent across the town centre. It seldom however shows any sign of life, and we believe more effort should be made to animate it with visual interest and activity, as an end in itself, and to emphasise the facility's premier status as Walsall's architectural 'jewel in the crown'.

The College

Although it has moved across the ring road, it enjoys excellent connectivity thanks to good planning and urban design. The super-crossing, 'shared space' street and active retail frontage all encourage trips into town from students and staff. This easy wayfinding deteriorates at St. Paul's street, part of the Town End focus area recommended in this Strategy.

The Hospital

This has always been a little further out, but is potentially well-linked by the canal corridor. Ongoing investment in the Waterfront is lifting urban quality here, and wayfinding interventions through this Strategy will help reinforce these improvements.

The Arboretum

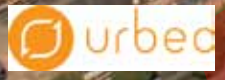
Another jewel, polished to restore its Victorian glory with a £4.7m Heritage Lottery Fund assisted upgrade. There is the potential for a clear, tree-lined 'boulevard' connection directly from 'the Bridge' along Lichfield Street, to tie this wonderful asset into the town centre's overall offer. This will involve removal of clutter around Bridge Street,

and a programme to address sightlines and public realm quality along the 5 – 10 minute walking route. If possible, the traffic light phasing at the ring-road junction should be adjusted to give pedestrians less time to wait and more time to cross.



Park Street

Morrisons



United Creatives™

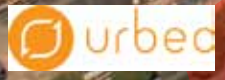
Established shops

The beating heart of Walsall's town centre is still the main retail and market street along Park Street, the Bridge and Digbeth, as it has been for many hundreds of years. Pedestrianised for twenty years or so, day-time footfall is highly successful, with this core area enjoying the metropolitan feel of a major city when at its busiest.

Walsall's Wayfinding Strategy is about protecting and expanding this busy core area, opening up new arteries and circulation routes for pedestrian flow, so the pulse of that ancient heartbeat is kept healthy, and felt further, around the entire centre.



Walsall Market



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The ancient street market

We feel town centre policy in Walsall needs to fully embrace the market, and highlight its virtues whilst addressing some of its shortfalls. Walsall exists firstly as a market town, and this ancient character can still be felt in the busy, lively, narrow rows of stalls that spread in three directions from the Bridge cross roads. Footfall is hugely higher on market days, and street life much more vibrant.

There is a sense that the Market is too jumbled and incoherently arranged, with issues of waste management and inappropriate location of down-market goods in the premier spaces around the Bridge, sometimes conflicting with ‘bricks and mortar’ stores.

In recognition of the Market’s role as a key ‘node’ in Walsall’s wayfinding pattern, we would recommend it be treated as a premier retail anchor, and upgraded in the following ways:

Traditional Wooden Stalls

The existing metal framed stalls look crude and do no justice to the market’s mediaeval provenance. We have seen towns like Chesterfield invest in classic traditional wooden trestle stalls, to

excellent effect. These are robust and much more resistance to vandalism than some fear. They can still be broken down and stored when needed.

Colourful Canopies

The current dark blue covers look dowdy and should be replaced by a more cheerful colour scheme to draw the eye from Town End and enliven the feel of the market when in it.

More targeted location

The Bridge is the town’s key public space, and should be the area where the market’s best fresh produce and hot food stalls are clustered, to produce an attractive and cosmopolitan outdoor food hall.

Walsall’s diverse array of cultures could be fully showcased here, from traditional Black Country and Staffordshire fare to international foods from the Caldmore Spice Trail.

Similarly, higher quality clothes and fabrics are an attraction that could run from the Bridge into the main retail streets of Park Street and Bradford Place, complementing the higher quality fashion

stores and fine architectural frontages here.

This would also help reduce conflict between the more ‘cheap and cheerful’ stalls and bricks and mortar shops in grade A retail space.

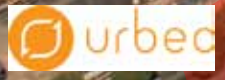
The bargain stalls should be clustered around Old Square, where the chance to grab money saving special offers better complements the shops operating there.

Waste management

Our wayfinding consultations revealed a consistent complaint about streets being restricted by empty produce boxes and cages from the market stalls. A better way of resolving this tension needs to be found in partnership with stall holders.

Courts, Police & Leather Museum

Civic Quarter



Civic areas and museums

Some of Walsall's main civic buildings were moved in the 1960s and 70s to the renewal area around the ring-road and Green Lane. This leaves them somewhat 'out on a limb'. However, the new 'shared space' street alongside Tesco does improve that situation to an extent, with the excellent Leather Museum now more prominent than before.

The Civic Quarter round the Town Hall, Swimming Pool and Library is much more central, and enjoys a good sense of place thanks to its fine Victorian/Edwardian architecture and very high quality recent 'shared space' public realm enhancements.

We would recommend these surface treatments be 'rolled out' when possible to encompass Lichfield Street and Bridge Street.



Station Street

Stafford Street

Victorian Arcade

Independent retailers

In contrast to its strong mainstream retail offer, Walsall has retained a more modest independent offer.

There are some interesting and quirky small traders however, and the Wayfinding strategy sees these as potentially central to the town's offer.

One problem is that the independent sector is fragmented into a number of small clusters, often in smaller blocks of historic building that escaped the widespread property clearance undertaken during the 60s and 70s.

These need help to develop a stronger 'critical mass', perhaps through joint branding and promotion, as well as embedding within our suggested 'clover-leaf' of footfall circuits and clear quarters.



Nightclub

Leicester Street



Evening economy

Compared to many towns of its size and status, Walsall has a limited evening economy. In some ways, this is no bad thing, as an excess of 'vertical drinking' type establishments is often associated with health issues and anti-social behaviour. Properly managed of course, a good night out is something a town can be proud to offer, and there can be many employment and wealth creating opportunities associated with the evening leisure economy. These can include hotel and business tourism sectors in which Walsall has only a modest presence.

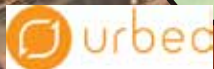
What is a clear weakness is the lack of any significant evening cultural offer – the town centre has over the years lost all its theatres and cinemas, and has very little to offer in the way of dining or other entertainment.

The nightclubs and pubs that do exist, mainly around Bridge Street and Leicester Street, with another within walking distance on Bradford Place, are thought to be well-run, working closely with West Midlands Police and the Council to offer visitors a safe and enjoyable time.

There is also great potential in the Caldmore Village Spice Trail, a 5 - 10 minute walk from Bradford Place, to become more widely appreciated as Walsall's international food quarter.



Light Industry & Commercial



Commercial employment areas

Finally, better Wayfinding can help Walsall town centre make more of the rich ‘business ecology’ found in the commercial employment areas adjacent, notably the Premier Business Park,

These areas contain hundreds of business employing thousands of people, many of whom use the town centre, especially at lunchtimes.

Our consultations confirmed many such firms are still locally owned/managed small and medium enterprises (SMEs), who take great pride in their Walsall and Black Country roots. There are also larger firms like Yale and Homeserve who make a great contribution.

There is no reason why these adjacent commercial areas should not be more clearly linked to the town centre proper. There are still authentic saddleries and leather craft-workshops operating in historic factory buildings just a minute’s walk from the New Gallery – yet hidden away from sight.

Industry made modern Walsall – it remains key to future prosperity, and can be presented as a proud element of the central area.



Can we discern a clear pattern?

A clear pattern may not be immediately obvious, but in fact our analysis shows Walsall has a strong underlying 'Clover-Leaf' spatial structure.

The key streets and quarters are arranged in the Clover-Leaf shape, potentially the ideal framework to maximise footfall circulation and therefore trading opportunities.

By consistently emphasising this Clover-Leaf of cross roads and four clear urban quarters we can make Walsall town centre more memorable and easy to navigate.

This strong 'mind map' image will encourage visitors to feel comfortable and confident to explore more of the town, uncovering its many hidden gems.

The emphasis on the Clover-Leaf needs to occur on maps and publicity material, but also out in the streets themselves.

This means paying special attention to reinforcement of sight lines and removal of barriers wherever needed around the Clover-Leaf.



Leather Museum

College

Tesco

Bridge Street

PART 4: How good is Wayfinding now?

The Strategy and Action Plan section makes clear recommendations for the Clover-Leaf and suggests a menu of ideas to consider.

There are strong and weak aspects to Walsall's legibility and way finding at present.

Informal wayfinding via legible townscapes, though obscured in many places, has considerable underlying strength. The town is basically 'permeable', compact and walkable.

The main retail street is particularly strong in its fundamental form, enlivened by its ancient linear market, with shopping malls, glazed arcades and public transport facilities immediately alongside. Main car parks and supermarkets are within a minute of this central spine.

Unfortunately the town centre offers very limited formal way finding assistance to visitors at present. There is a drab information board halfway along Park Street containing a leaflet with a basic map.

Worse still is the acute visual and physical clutter that blights the main spine route, reducing it to a quarter of its natural width in places. Other important streets also suffer from an excess of barriers to easy movement.

This document uses the example of the new Tesco and College to illustrate the best and worst of these strengths, weaknesses and opportunities. From the New Art Gallery the rebuilt Walsall College and Tesco are visible just beyond Park Place.

For such large developments, they sit well in the townscape. It is unusual for a superstore and car-park of this size to be relatively well harmonised with the existing street scene.

This has been achieved by placing the car-park in an undercroft and elevating the main trading floor. Ugly views into the parking area, and the large inactive elevations associated with big-box retail, have been cleverly avoided by lining the side elevations with separate shop and office units.

This is the extra advantage of bringing a more diverse mix of uses to what could be a monolithic land-use pattern, and, most importantly, animating the two streets alongside.

Sightlines and street form are clear and the public realm very high quality on the new 'shared space' link between the college and main Tesco entrance.

There is a wide, single phase 'super-crossing' across the ring road, and clear sightlines to the College and Leather Museum.

Public realm materials are good quality, with generously sized spaces either side of the road that encourage students to gather and meet.

As a future aspiration, it would be nice to integrate the two public spaces of the Leather Museum garden and the College 'plaza' more strongly. At present these two excellent public assets sit adjacent but all but separate from one-another.



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The college is well connected by a new street

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As a future aspiration, it would be nice to integrate the two public spaces of the Leather Museum garden and the College 'plaza' more strongly. At present these two excellent public assets sit adjacent but all but separate from one-another.

Harmonising such a large superstore and car-park into the existing street scene, and indeed creating successful new streetscapes alongside, is an unusual achievement.

Contrast this scheme to the earlier ASDA design in Darlaston, where a long stretch of dead wall has effectively killed half the historic high street. It is clear that lessons have been learned.

Successful design has been achieved by placing the car-park in an undercroft and elevating the main trading floor.

The potentially ugly views into the parking area, and the large inactive elevations associated with big-box retail, have been cleverly avoided by lining the side elevations with separate shop and office units.

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Weak sightlines to the centre can be made more obvious

The good urban design of this new piece of Walsall abruptly meets the planning mistakes of the past at St. Paul's Street.

Shoppers and students reaching the town centre threshold here are presented with the blank wall at the back of Park Place, embellished with rather heroic signage that fails to offer much reason to proceed further.

There is a pedestrian crossing but it is not on the direct desire line from the College/Tesco. There is no clear sightline to the town centre's attractions.

This is one of the largest barriers to footfall and linked trips in the entire town centre, and needs to be seen as a top Wayfinding priority.

The blank wall can be seen as an opportunity as well as a problem.

It potentially presents a 'canvas' or backdrop for creative interventions to support easier wayfinding and encourage people across this threshold from 'edge of centre' to town centre core.

This could be a relatively simple intervention such as a stencilled sign, or a more elaborate artistic installation, as resources allow.

The URBED-United Creatives team worked with local stakeholders to generate a number of concepts for the large wall along the back of Park Place. The owners are in agreement in principle to a large scale fixed signage system of some kind here.



There is a link, but it's invisible. Where is everyone!?

The Park Place (former 'Quasar') arcade also struggles to draw footfall between Park Street and the new Tesco area.

As a consequence, the units within struggle to attract sufficient trade to keep them viable, which makes it still harder to draw footfall – a vicious circle.

Shoppers tend to prefer staying outside on the street 'at grade' round Town End, as opposed to taking the escalator through the internal mall space.

There are likely to be a compound of reasons for this.

The first is about the 'image' of the route choice in terms of signage and sightlines – people have the 'Town End' route on their mental map.

This could be helped by a clearer 'Tesco' and College sign on the south side escalator atrium, and an intervention on the north side 'Wilkinson's Wall'.

The second is the change in level – all things being equal, people on foot always prefer to stay at grade. There is little that can be done to change this.

A third reason is the gloomy nature of the mall space. A strategy to re-activate empty units with meanwhile uses, and perhaps animate the mall with appropriate live music etc., may help footfall and dwell time.



Main shopping areas are vibrant - some clean and classy streets

Walsall's core town centre 'high street' (Park Street, Digbeth, Bradford Street and the Bridge) is lively, vital and vibrant, especially on Market Days, which are everyday except Thursday and Sunday. Stall charges are modest at £20 - £40 depending on the day.

Footfall is generated by good representation from major high street brands. The Saddlers Centre is a fairly modern indoor mall, which also gives access to the town's main railway station. Old Square contains a Debenhams Department Store, although the mall format is dated. Primark has relocated here, reinforcing the Bridge area as a fashion and footwear hub.

Walsall's Civic Quarter enjoyed public realm investment a few years ago. This was undertaken to an excellent 'shared space' design standard. Street clutter has been minimised and the surface treatment kept commendably simple.

This approach allows the fine architectural qualities of areas like Leicester Street to be better appreciated.

Wayfinding here is easy and comfortable, because sightlines are clear, local landmarks like pubs, the former cinema and 'the Crossing' are allowed to stand out.

A nice touch is the street surface picking up the presence of the underground rivers, with a change in paving material. This would benefit from some kind of explanatory plaque or map nearby.

When resources allow, we would recommend the roll out of the same or equally simple, well thought-through public realm treatment. Bridge Street and Lichfield Street would be our first priorities.

The elegant buildings around the junction of Leicester Street, Lichfield Street and Bridge Street form a potentially well defined public space, capable of creating a new square at the fulcrum of the route between the Bridge and the Arboretum.

For this to work, this junction must be cleared of its heavy brick planters, railings and other highway clutter. These block sightlines and are a barrier to pedestrian movement.

Park Street is Walsall's premier shopping area. Its scale, buildings and proportion are the equal of many 'big city' shopping streets, and it retains a good range of retail brands. Overall, it remains a successful example of a pedestrianised high street precinct.

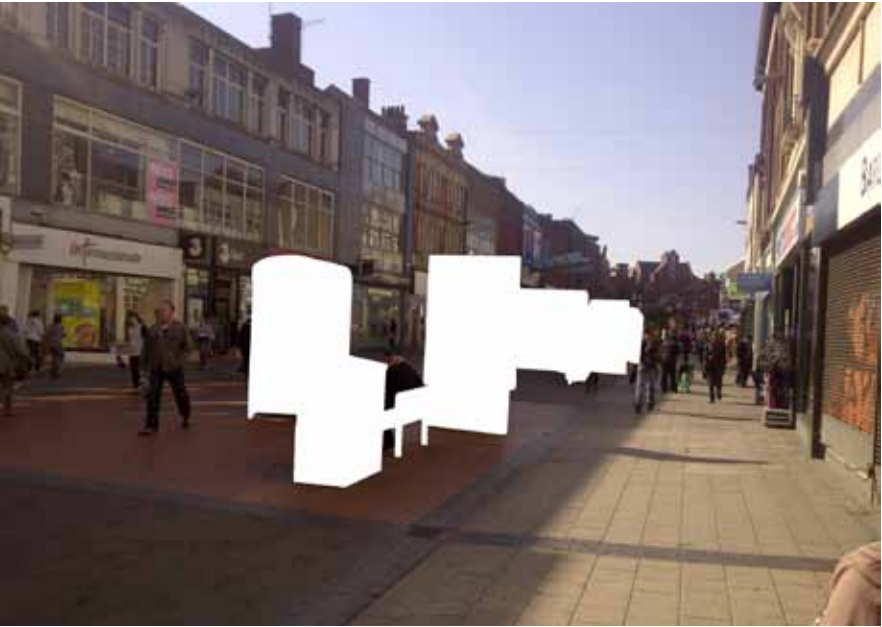
However, the form and function is badly spoiled by an excess of intrusive street furniture.

Around the Saddlers centre, such clutter is so dominant it reduces the proportion of the street available to pedestrians to around a quarter of its actual width. People are squeezed into a narrow section when they should be able to roam easily across the entire width of the space.

Sightlines are also heavily disrupted, which is likely to deter comfortable footfall.

Park Street is just one example of a street spoiled by clutter.

A similar issue applies to other parts of Walsall town centre, notably the Bridge and Bridge Street.



Some fine streets are spoiled by clutter

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A similar issue applies to other parts of Walsall town centre, notably the Bridge and Bridge Street.

The top left image highlights some of the many items that clutter up Park Street. They include advertising screens, phone booths, planters, bins and benches.

Of course, some of these are perfectly useful items, well used by local people. The problem comes from their cumulative impact, with the street filled up with items and routes for pedestrians blocked.

Views to important town centre attractions like shop frontages, the Saddler Centre and Walsall Railway Station are disrupted, making wayfinding more difficult than it need be.

Our photo montage shows how Park Street might look cleared of its street clutter, and with clearer signage highlighting Walsall Railway Station.

We believe wayfinding and footfall would be significantly assisted by such tidying of the street scene.

Cost would be relatively modest compared to an entirely new street surfacing project.

Public realm materials could be upgraded to a similar specification to the successful 'Civic Quarter' when resources allow.

The image shown is intended only as a sketch concept.

It may well be that seating areas, street trees, kiosks and so on are still desirable, but can be provided in a format that allows easier pedestrian flow and makes more use of Park Street's generous width.

This historic photo shows Park Street around a 100 years ago, when trams and horse drawn vehicles shared the street with people on foot.

Of particular note is the ornate Railway Station and theatres – their architecture acts effectively as signage indicating these buildings' purpose.



Some street furniture is looking tired



Be proud - Walsall is beautiful



The Midlands or Milan?

Walsall is beautiful - it should be celebrated

The image of a place is heavily influenced by the condition of its public realm.

Tired street furniture like this, especially when emblazoned with the town's name, sends a message of its own.

Walsall has many much better examples, but an audit of such items would be a simple and useful exercise to identify pieces in need of renovation, replacement or removal.

Walsall has many beautiful buildings. If you look up while exploring the town there is a rich and varied townscape to enjoy above the standardised commercial fascias.

The High Street Guildhall is one such example. This occupies the site of one of Walsall's earliest seats of local government, dating back many centuries to the 1400s. The Town Hall was here from 1547, with the present building constructed c. 1865. It was vacated for the newly built Council House on Lichfield Street in 1905, and after various uses including a magistrates court and offices, it is now a restaurant.

Although Walsall has lost many characterful commercial and industrial buildings, it still retains enough in its central area to make it a genuinely interesting historic town.

It is good to find information plaques on a number of points of interest. As well as the Guildhall, these include Jerome K. Jerome's birthplace on Bradford Place, and the building damaged by a WWI Zeppelin blast nearby. There is also information on the plinth of Sister Dora's statue on the Bridge, and the bust of Victoria Cross hero John Carless on Lichfield Street, amongst other places.

All of this adds texture to the town. We propose augmenting this when resources allow with a wayfinding trail called 'Look Up Walsall'. This would be a series of bronze or brass plaques throughout the town highlighting points of interest, accompanied by online and printed learning resources. People would be invited to nominate a new location/s every year or so once the first 10 – 20 were in.

The Victorian Arcade is another of Walsall's gems.

It could easily be from a major historic city. Yet it remains slightly hidden and struggles to sustain high footfall levels, despite a good configuration with three entrances, two on the busiest shopping streets.

We believe part of the issue is the lack of visibility of the Arcade entrances from these main streets, and the low quality sliding doors and signage currently installed.

We also suggest more attention is given to enhancing the internal ambience, perhaps with attractions like live classical music and flower festivals.

This could help generate a stronger pedestrian circuit through the Arcade and the adjacent streets.



Architectural heritage is worth noting

As well as historic architecture, Walsall has shown confidence in its embrace of contemporary building design.

The New College is the latest example, following in the footsteps of the New Art Gallery and Walsall Housing Group office. The Bus Station is also a commendably bold design, although rightly criticised for its constrained functionality.

Walsall has a reasonably respectable history of better quality modernist architecture, with the Police Station, St. Patrick's RC Church and some of the residential tower blocks good examples of their type.

Distinctive new buildings can become their own local landmarks, with the Gallery playing this role particularly effectively as a unique element in the skyline.

Walsall retains an active leather making industry employing around 1,000 people, and celebrates its long history in the trade in the town's Leather Museum on Littleton Street West.

Its location in a former factory gives the museum an enjoyable authenticity, with staff who actually worked in the industry on hand to answer questions and demonstrate techniques.

The museum used to feel slightly out on a limb, beyond the ring road from the town centre. But now it is much more prominent, thanks to the new College and Tesco development, with the 'shared space' link leading directly towards its main entrance.

The museum has an attractive outdoor garden area where people can enjoy some quiet recreation. This is another of Walsall's gems.



Travelling into Walsall by Bus and Train

Walsall is lucky to have its main rail and bus stations just a minute from its prime shopping street.

Unfortunately the town lets this advantage slip by allowing the linkages to present such a poor impression to visitors.

Park Street Arcade, which links the new bus station, is marred by pigeon mess and a very poorly maintained interior. We believe its private owners should be pressed hard to improve upkeep of what is potentially an attractive early 20th century glazed arcade.

The council have responsibility for the right of way and regulation of signage, which is confusing and poor quality.

We propose a focused approach using regulatory and financial 'sticks and carrots' to incentivise transformation of this key strategic link.

An indicative concept artwork for the blank window frontage has been worked up by our team, for implementation in partnership with the

College and traders.

Butler's passage is thought to be an old right of way dating back many centuries.

It is well used but physically problematic, as it is not overlooked and does not allow clear sightlines through. There are also inset doorways within the alley.

This encourages actual and perceived anti-social behaviour issues, which present a maintenance and cleaning burden.

The link's proximity to the bus station and car parks mean it is part of the impression of the town given to visitors – and it is universally acknowledged to be a poor one.

The council has tried to address this with a 'gateway' installation and signage, and wall murals to brighten the alley way up. This is perceived to have been poor value and has not altered the fundamental problems of misuse.

Our recommendation is to make some relatively

low cost additions.

Shutters should be used to block off the inset doorways, which attract misuse.

Colourful ceramic glazed tiles should be applied to the walls, potentially with a wayfinding art work, to brighten up the route, deter graffiti, and allow easy hose down cleaning.

Suspended grid light systems are used successfully in similar spaces elsewhere, making the route more amenable at night and further deterring misuse, especially if combined with discreet CCTV.

Finally, the gateway features could be improved by re-colouring and better signage.



Is this the first impression you want to give rail passengers'?

Walsall maintains its mainline station, but has suffered a sad fall in its railway infrastructure over the last two decades.

There are regular connections to Birmingham New Street, but the direct Wolverhampton service was recently stopped, removing access to this key interchange.

The gateway approach and signage to the station facilities can only be described as poor.

There is barely any profile for this key public transport facility on Park Street, and the link along Station Street presents an unfairly grim first impression of Walsall to rail passengers.

We are told the configuration of the station, with the Saddlers centre above, acts as a bottle-neck to electrification improvements to this stretch of railway.

All this is all the more poignant when many residents still remember Walsall's Victorian Station building, with its ornate booking hall and prominent 'porte cochere' canopy onto Park Street.

Of course, using the space for retail has generated its own efficiencies and opportunities that have enhanced Walsall's economy – the long term aim should be to combine both transport and retail functions in an environment that does justice to both.



SLEEP MAN
BY YOUR SIDE
TRAVEL BY TRAIN
TO LIVERPOOL

Four posters on a stand, including one with the text "TRAVEL BY TRAIN TO LIVERPOOL".

POSTERS
POSTERS
POSTERS
POSTERS
POSTERS
POSTERS
POSTERS
POSTERS
POSTERS
POSTERS



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Walsall is beautiful - it should be celebrated

However, from the entrance to the town's high street core, Park Street, route clarity is poor and footfall consequently weakened, threatening the viability of traders.

The main shopping and market area remain vibrant, with classic high street qualities the equal of larger historic cities.

The best public realm and townscapes like Leicester Street's shared spaces in the town hall civic quarter are clean, uncluttered and classy.

However, other premier streets are badly spoiled by excessive clutter and tired street furniture.

Park Street is chronically affected, to the extent that items block site lines and disrupt pedestrian flow.

The generous width of Walsall's grade A retail street is reduced by up to 75% near the Saddler's Centre.

URBED have produced visualisations that show how the street could be opened up and footfall

capacity improved at minimal cost.

The Bridge and Bridge Street also have sightlines and footfall routes blocked by traffic barriers and inappropriately sited trees and artworks.

Such tired and cluttered public realm detracts from Walsall's rich architectural legacy.

We agree with townspeople and traders who urge visitors to 'Look Up' and enjoy Walsall's beautiful buildings, including the Guild Hall, Taylor's Music Shop, New Gallery and Victorian Arcade.

Walsall displays confidence in modern design and respect for its industrial heritage.

But some of its gems remain to be uncovered - Bradford Place and the Art School are obscured by dated bus stops, and poor links to the Railway Station (Station Street) and Bus Station (Butlers Passage and Park Street Arcade) let the whole town down, offering an unfairly poor first impression on arrival.

The vibrant mediaeval market, the ancient

heartbeat of the town, is a key source of vitality, but is presented as a down-market affair rather than a proud link of continuous trade through the centuries.

Existing town centre map



pedestrian Zone
At any time



POLICE STATION

LAW COURTS

WALSALL COLLEGE

LEATHER MUSEUM

ARBORETUM

ROUTE TO BIRMINGHAM

Crown Wharf Shopping Centre

Tesco

Morrisons

CIVIC CENTRE

BATHS LIBRARY

POST OFFICE

Park Place

Park Place

Blue Mark School
Civic Centre
Georgina's Fashion
H&M
Park Place Metro (for
Park Place, Town Hall)

ART GALLERY



THE CROSSING

COUNCIL HOUSE

Saddlers Shopping Centre

Old Square

Victorian Arcade

ASDA

Saddlers Shopping Centre

- Le Sells
- Ujary Menswear
- Ujary Direct
- Wilmshott's Jewellery
- Diggins
- 1940 Jeans
- ProtonBand
- Subway
- Subs Plus
- THE BLOWER & CO LTD
- The Bazaar Den
- The Fragrance Shop
- Trapsan Direct Trapsan
- Vision Express
- Amalison
- Helen James
- Woods Vinylage

Victorian Arcade

- Walsall Football Club
- Walsall Museum
- Walsall Town Hall
- Walsall Theatre
- Walsall Youth Centre
- Walsall Sports Centre
- Walsall Leisure Centre
- Walsall Community Centre
- Walsall Arts Centre
- Walsall Music Centre
- Walsall Dance Centre
- Walsall Badminton Club
- Walsall Table Tennis Club
- Walsall Chess Club
- Walsall Golf Club
- Walsall Cricket Club
- Walsall Rugby Club
- Walsall Hockey Club
- Walsall Netball Club
- Walsall Badminton Club
- Walsall Table Tennis Club
- Walsall Chess Club
- Walsall Golf Club
- Walsall Cricket Club
- Walsall Rugby Club
- Walsall Hockey Club
- Walsall Netball Club

Memorable?

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Old Square

A34 TO BIRMINGHAM/M6 J7

New Invention

BLOXWICH

Rushall

Leamore

To Stafford

To Lichfield

Birchills

BENTLEY

WALSALL

To Wolverhampton

To Wednesbury

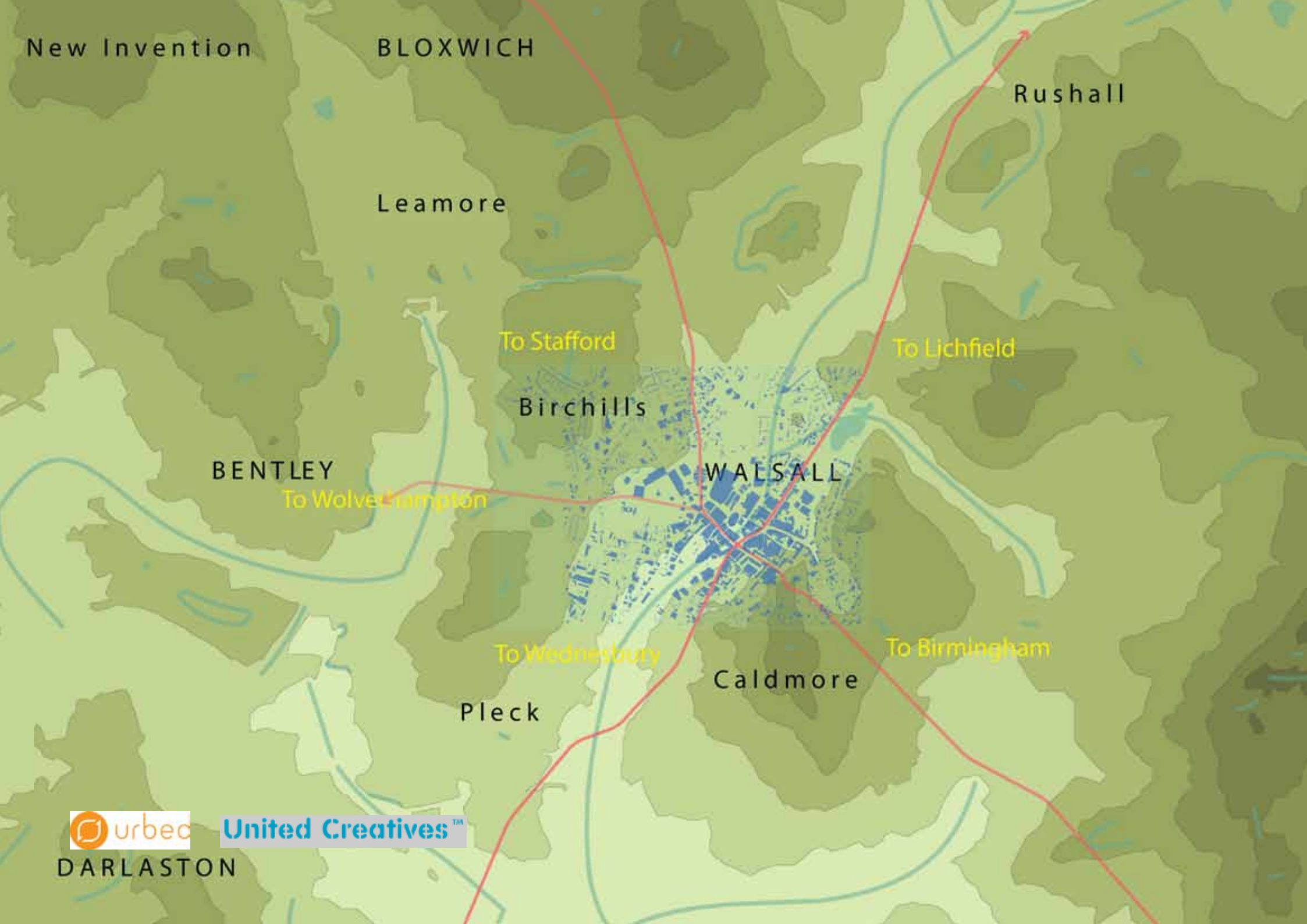
To Birmingham

Caldmore

Pleck



DARLASTON



Structure



High Street/Market Axis

St. Matthew's
Church Spire

Walsall Art
Gallery



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SHOP UNITS
TO LET
(AS CONSENT)

RETAIL/OFFICE
TO LET
First Floor 1000 SQ FT
ALL ENQUIRIES
BWD
01923 14 30

Framed views to Spire



Framed views to Gallery



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DEBENHAMS
STYLING THE NATION



COMPLETE ENTERTAINMENT EXCHANGE
CEx

Blocked views in places

United Creatives™



Town Hall/Bradford Place

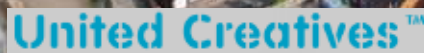
Arboretum

Town Hall
Tower

St. Matthew's
Church Spire

Cenotaph


Walsall Art
Gallery





The Bridge to Bradford Place

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 urbec



urbec

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Lichfield St 'Boulevard'

FD55 KGD



United Creatives™

urbec

Bridge or Barrier?





Town Hall

Arboretum

War Memorial

Art Gallery

PART 5: Wayfinding Strategy & Action Plan

Our Strategy's big idea is to reinforce the two primary axial routes that cross at the Bridge, and to differentiate four distinct quarters. Decision points at key gateways and approaches need to be addressed.

Overall, Walsall's wayfinding is clearly inadequate and a more memorable sequence of visual guides is needed.

The first phase of actions will focus around the Town End area.

This is a crucial but dysfunctional interface between major new footfall generators including Crown Wharf retail park, the new Tesco and College, and the Waterfront/Gallery canal side, leading to the redeveloped Manor Hospital.

We want to turn Town End into more of a bridge and less of a barrier to footfall flow.

Beyond Town End, a range of suggestions for future actions are offered as a menu of ideas and opportunities, which we hope will stimulate further creative installations.

The Vision is for Walsall town centre to be welcoming and attractive to visitors, so easy to navigate and move round on foot that all

its attractions and amenities can be accessed comfortably, whether people are familiar with Walsall or not.

The overarching aim is to maximise footfall and trade by helping Walsall present its varied asset base as a more unified town centre offer.

The primary objective is to support existing busy footfall routes, and open up underused ones.

The spatial framework is the memorable Clover-Leaf of cross routes and quarters enjoyed by Walsall, which needs to be reinforced and revealed.

Action Plan

First Phase Projects – Town End Area

- Town End Wall Artwork
- Park Street Arcade Upgrade
- St. Paul St. 'Wilkinson Wall' Artwork

'Clover-Leaf' of Suggested Future Projects

High Street and Market Axis (west to east)

- Laser Link - Gallery to St. Matthew's spire
- Gallery Square Strategy - Activity and public realm
- Park Street Strategy - Declutter and public realm
- Walsall Market Strategy - Stalls and canopies upgrade
- Overstrand Removal (complete)
- High Street Strategy - Activity and public realm
- St. Matthew's Strategy - Steps and Memorial Gardens, floodlighting spire

Civic Axis (north to south)

- Lichfield Street Strategy – boulevard link to Arboretum
- Bridge Street Strategy – Declutter and public realm
- The Bridge Strategy – Declutter and Premium Food/Asian Market
- Victorian Arcade – highlight entrances, lunchtime performances
- Bradford Place Strategy – Declutter and public realm, Walsall Science and Art Institute
- Lighting Town Hall Tower



Town Centre Core

Civic Quarter

Bridge Street

St. Matthew's

Quarters (anti-clockwise)

- Civic Quarter
- Saddler Centre
- St. Matthew's Quarter
- Bridge Street Quarter

Our tentative early ideas for revealing and celebrating more of Walsall's best character involve the classic 'Town of 100 Trades' iconography, which blends traditional and modern aspects very powerfully.

We would like to emphasise the point that Walsall is and has long been a place that designs and makes useful, sometimes beautiful things, and is also a longstanding centre of commerce. Trade is associated with pride and application of skill.

We also love the deeper narratives found here of travelling fairs, market days, waterways and gypsy show people that go back through the centuries to the times of mediaeval guilds. You can still feel the spirit of such street life and joi de vivre especially when the market stalls are open.

These combined traditions of diligent, skilled work and colourful, exuberant play offer an enticing combination to work with in artistic terms. The rich stock of Georgian and Victorian buildings and their surviving mediaeval street form help underpin this historic resonance.