

# The curse of graffiti-covered security shutters

*And what it says about us*

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If you've walked down Goldhawk Road on a summer's evening, or a weekend, you will surely have seen the metal security shutters which blank out almost every retail premises. They are typically also covered in a chaotic scrawl of graffiti and spray paint. The overall effect is ugly and menacing, with the sense of a community existing in a grim Hobbesian state of nature. Are these places that anyone with other options would enjoy spending time in? Most likely not. The result is a relentless dynamic of decline.



Goldhawk Road 2023

In 1994 the Home Office published a much-referenced paper called 'Designing Out Crime' which deplored the proliferation of external shutters in high streets across the country. Most councils, including ours, have explicit policy guidance against their use, and yet in Goldhawk Road, Uxbridge Road, Hammersmith Road and even King Street there are now more than ever.

The spreading blight of external security shutters reveals not only weakness in our planning and enforcement system, but also more systemic problems around standards and expectations, as well as community engagement.

## Taking a View

A member contribution published by The Hammersmith Society

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Over the summer your authors undertook an exercise to try and tackle the security shutter problem. We looked at the high streets mentioned earlier and submitted in total 41 complaints about external security shutters in those streets. According to the council's own guidance, all of these should have been the subject of planning applications, and given the widespread appreciation of the damage they do to streetscapes permission would very likely have been refused.

We were hopeful that at least some of these shutters would be 'actionable'. But the message that came back from enforcement officers was that *in every single case* the shutters were over four years old and had therefore acquired 'legal' status.

Then a 'Kafkaesque' twist to this bureaucratic procedure. Enforcement told us that they considered serving a 'S215 notice' requiring the owners of premises with graffiti-covered shutters to clean them up, if not remove them entirely. Sometimes called an 'untidy site notice', S215 is a useful way of dealing with a range of streetscape situations that are, to use a vernacular expression, eyesores.

This sounded like a promising alternative line of attack. But then came the blow: *because there are now so many of these graffiti-covered shutters, they can be considered as representing the established character of the area*. In which case a main justification for serving a S215 notice falls away.

It's worth letting the implications of this sink in. The decision is saying in effect that absolute standards no longer apply, that the primary issue is relative difference rather than a failure to meet a broadly accepted level of tidiness, aesthetic quality or historical accuracy. We were deeply shocked by this and we hope you are too.

If high streets such as Uxbridge Road have crossed a kind of 'event horizon' and are no longer retrievable, can we at least arrest this process of decline before it's too late? All our experience suggests this is very difficult. Traditional shop fronts are ripped out and replaced with garish glass and metal (often with external shutters!), even in conservation areas like King Street. Enforcement does some box-ticking but the vandalism is never reversed.

Raising these issues with local councillors, two themes recur. The first is that they regret this destruction but there is little or nothing the council can do. Not true. We have local planning guidance and national advertising rules which are enough to control all of the blight we experience, given the will to do it. It could be more detailed and prescriptive about exactly what is allowed, but we are trying to get off the bottom and the basic levers are there.

The second is a mantra along the lines of 'Hammersmith is a deprived area; all high streets are struggling; and the UK economy is terrible'. The implication being that we have to set our standards low and not fuss too much, otherwise that amusement arcade or betting shop might set up somewhere else.

All this is wrong and the result feels like defeatism. You can argue that how a high street looks isn't the 'be-all and end-all'. But this attitude of having tools but not using them, of finding excuses to not do things, and flinching away from high expectations – this eventually feeds into more generalised failures.

Grandiose 'regeneration' projects like the Town Hall Campus can catalyse change, but it is wrong to imagine them casting an effortless spell over the struggling streets nearby. The optimism, the change of mood comes not just from new buildings but also a reset of attitude. Set a standard and invite others to join you; through rigour in planning and enforcement create a virtuous circle where people

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begin to think (and care, and invest) in the bigger picture, not just in making their own shop even brighter, brasher and more spuriously secure to the detriment of everyone else.

We end with an image of one of the exemplary shop fronts in King Street – the Royal Trinity Hospice charity shop. This simple, restrained frontage demonstrates that there is nothing expensive or ‘elitist’ about high standards in our high streets. It is perfectly possible to have a collection of ordinary, everyday businesses meeting local needs and for it also to feel like people there are working together in the common interest to create public spaces that are as good as they can be.

What more could one ask for?

