2026 VOLUME 133 ISSUE 3

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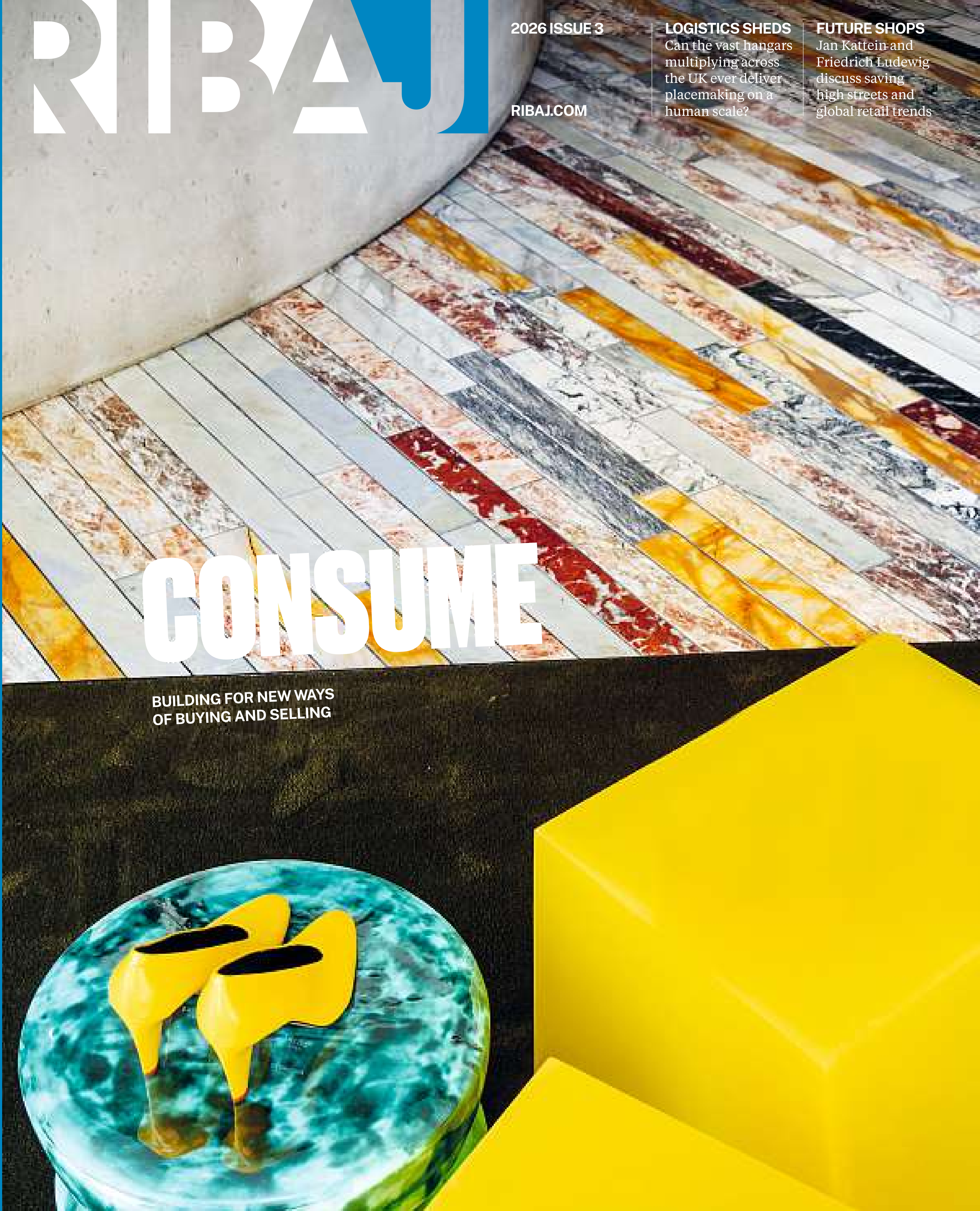

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Jan Kattein and Friedrich Ludewig, two very different designers of urban spaces and shopping experiences, on what's next for retail, why high streets still matter and learning from abroad

AS TOLD TO
Isabelle Priest

PORTRAIT
Ivan Jones

Opposite: Jan Kattein (left) and Friedrich Ludewig on Redchurch Street, Shoreditch, London.

Both of you have huge experience in designing for retail, can you tell us about it?
Jan Kattein: I founded Jan Kattein Architects and am an academic at UCL. A theme that runs across the practice and my research is giving communities a voice in shaping their environment. Many of the challenges we face are linked to consumerism and globalisation, where owning stuff and the associated commercial transactions are the cause of climate change. We're trying to move in a direction where monetary exchange becomes secondary. I'm not advocating for abolishing capitalism. In our projects, whether they are high street regeneration or work/community space, we help to build business plans that are sustainable by engaging with our economic system. High streets are a good example. They have a history of being about retail. As retail moves online, they must find new purpose, shifting from buying things to paying for experiences, for example.

Friedrich Ludewig: I'm an architect, educated in Berlin and London. I come from a family of priests and teachers on one side, and watchmakers on the other. On my father's side, there's a long history of being active on the high street, having a watch shop, then petrol stations and other things. I've been working in London since 2000. I founded ACME in 2007. A little by coincidence I've been working in retail from early on. In 2002 we won a competition to extend a shopping centre in Leicester, then another to build one in Istanbul in 2003. What has grown from those is a fascination with the potential of retail, in particular as an agent of change and ingredient of public space. In Leicester, speaking to retail developers was our best hope of achieving regeneration.

However, the glory days of retail-led town centre regeneration in the UK are behind us. Lots of cities had a try. What many architects have been engaged with in the last 10 years is unpacking the potential of things that are not working well. It's not always about building more. It's what to do with things from 10 to 50 years ago. We shouldn't be converting everything to residential. We need public spaces that have a civic sense.

What about retail beyond the high street?
FL: I believe we have seen the end of department stores. Not full extinction, but a reduction of species. John Lewis is going to survive and Flannels has carved out a niche. Those that have survived are probably it.

I don't know of anyone building shopping centres. My suspicion is that the Westfield Croydon scheme is more residential-led, consolidating its existing high street elements. Values of shopping malls were rock bottom two years ago. They've gone back up. Architects can hope that leads to a little investment in those we have, since quite a few are tired and need help to compete with online.

On high streets, we have an insane number of charity shops and high vacancy rates. The UK has worse high streets than France, Germany or China. It's a national not international problem, and so should be fixable. The French and Germans have comparable spending power and are so similar to us they are interesting models.

The state of retail is also a result of UK local authorities having given more planning consents for out-of-town retail than the French, Germans and others. In Swansea, we're fighting a 20-year losing battle against them. They are a little more convenient, parking is free and less painful. But they have no civic and public qualities. This is a failure of every local authority and the national planning system. We haven't recognised how important the high street is. Should you let the most powerful retailers go out of town into a box? The Germans and French probably haven't prevented it deliberately; they are just more conservative and laws don't permit that level of out-of-town retail. If you must make it work in the city centre, people will. Then the critical mass remains and independents are more likely to thrive. When we worked in Australia with a shopping centre developer we built a market hall with 40 independent retailers between a Coles and Woolworths – their Tesco and Sainsbury's. It is succeeding. You can put a butcher where you know the cow came from 20 miles away in front of a supermarket that sells meat. It works on proximity. People want to do one journey. But if you can make part of that journey richer, they're up for it.

JK: On the question of the future and viability, retailers are receding from certain parts of town centres. Our work

ACME

Left: The Liverpool Street Station redesign by ACME brings in more retail by consolidating it on the ground floor and two balconies to Exchange Square.

Opposite: Jan Kattein Architects' Sayer Street meanwhile mini-high street for Lendlease Elephant Park in Southwark, completed 2020.

occupies a niche. If you want to open a shop on a high street, you generally need to sign a long lease and invest in fitting out a shell and core unit or one that's fallen into disrepair. You're up for a substantial business rates bill, related to the value of the property rather than what your business does or whether it provides social value and contributes to the area's vibrance. Our work often introduces a smaller model of retail and workspace, exempt from business rates with significantly lower rents. You don't have to sign a 20-year lease. People have space to fail, which means they have a greater chance of success because the risk is calculable and won't tie you in long term and to mountains of debt.

Rebalancing outside of architecture needs to happen: of business rates, the leasehold system and this idea that a freehold value is determined by the level of rent for a business unit, meaning many landowners are reluctant to drop rents because it would write off freehold values. If we tackle this stranglehold of systems, town centres would have a renaissance. People are entrepreneurial, and ready to embrace opportunities. Many spaces we create are often let before they are finished.

FL: One thing that has worked in the UK recently is moving to turnover rents. I would like to see that for business rates too. It would make a massive difference to how spaces are used and by whom.

Why is the high street important?

JK: It's about democracy. They are the places where cultures and needs mix, that are public and accessible to all. By default it's also a place of friction. Algorithms in social media feed us things we like, which is dangerous if you've got democratic values. A low level of conflict is helpful to understand other people's needs and learn to respect them, as well as to build compromise and consensus around us as a society. Those encounters and experiences are the foundation of democracy. People sense that. High streets aren't only about shopping; they're about identity, culture and belonging. We need to claw them back as places of participation, empathy and togetherness. The government is trying to address those priorities through the Pride in Place programme, which has led to some outstanding projects.

FL: I agree, it's reminiscent of the broken window theorem. To me, a vacant shop is like a broken window. If there's a shop that's empty for a year and then another empty for half a year, suddenly the street feels on a fast slope to half broken. That leads to a sense that democracy isn't working and delivering. There's a feeling the UK is in a terrible state. I don't agree, but if there are too many of those moments, it's easy for it to feel under siege. For that reason, it is important that the high street performs the job of being a democratic, civic space that feels alive.

Jan, some of your projects are retail incubators. Do people grow onwards from them?

JK: Aberfeldy Street in Poplar is a colourful high street. Initially, about 50% of the shops had closed. Through a process of engagement, capital works and getting in new creative entrepreneurs, we brought it back to life. Now it's part of a masterplan and the street is up for demolition. On the face of it, it's heartbreaking; but in reality wonderful things happened. There was a pharmacy that had been struggling. They embraced the regeneration and now they've doubled in size and moved into permanent premises in the new scheme. In another part, a residential building is awaiting demolition. In the interim we're turning ground-floor maisonettes into shops for an initial period of 10 years with the aim of later relocating businesses permanently. Turning flats into shops is pretty unheard of. But the housing association client is very invested in the place, which is what is needed.

Friedrich, what can architects do about vacant shops?

FL: In Swansea, we've been working with the local authority to fill the Quadrant shopping centre and the high street. The retail spaces are larger than they need to be now. The first decision we put to the council was around which of the two they wanted to succeed. Both horses were not going to get over the line. We recommended making the high street full and vibrant, and turning the 1970s concrete Quadrant into something else – perhaps an entrepreneurial space around Swansea's marine engineering or sustainable energy generation that helps it hang onto more of the graduates it produces per year.

Other cities have different potentials. The question is: what local elements could take over? What Roger de Haan achieved in Folkestone by buying 96 buildings on the high street and letting them to artists on peppercorn rents is perhaps a model of dealing with vacancy. Once you have a few shops, you can talk about the high street differently. You can determine its future and question its identity. We don't all want the same high street and shops. Maybe we could do more as landowners coming together with local government to look at planning proactively.

IP: Have the clients you worked with changed over time?

JK: A large proportion of our high street work was prompted by the Greater London Authority through the Outer London Fund. Prior to that, there was a greater focus on out-of-town shopping and shopping centres. Those early high street projects were ambitious but relatively conventional, improving public realm and shopfronts. The conversation broadened to move workspaces, cultural organisations and healthcare into town centres, and a broader range of clients came our way. We are doing a bid with Lendlease for High Road West in Tottenham because it realised that it couldn't ignore the high street for its housing scheme behind. Recently though, it's become more challenging because financial pressure on development has increased.

FL: The only places where we see people building dedicated spaces for retail, rather than activating the ground floors of larger buildings, are China and the Middle East. China does online shopping at a scale that we have never experienced. However, I would say they have picked a fight with the internet much more than in Europe, the US or Australia. We capitulated. We saw the convenience of online because our shops weren't that special to begin with. The Chinese have not taken that approach. Shops offer a different level of haptic sensory experience. Even in average to middle-class shops there is a lot of architecture

JAN KATTEIN ARCHITECTS

Right: High street reuse and recycled shop redesign in Acton, London, designed by Jan Kattein Architects, completed 2022.

JAN KATTEIN ARCHITECTS

and interior design. Nothing reminds you about online. It is about how you engage with the product and have an interesting experience.

For example, one bakery in Xi'an has an amazing shop fit, but they also celebrate that they've made the goods. Everything is out on show. There's a board that says the price and when it was made. You can see when the next croissants are coming out. Something is happening every five or 10 minutes. That's what we're missing with food and retail products. The other difference is that five or 10 years ago in China, you would be building indoor shopping centres. They have rediscovered the value of outside streets that feel democratic, rather than security controlled, carefully filling them with curated independents. These are private clients with a conviction in making physical spaces I've not seen elsewhere.

JK: There are also interesting opportunities around the circular economy. ReTuna is a shopping mall in Sweden dedicated to reused and recycled items. Kierrätyskeskus in Finland are recycled-goods department stores offering entry-level selling space in bigger units. You pay an affordable rent and share of commission. This is starting to get ordinary people thinking carefully when buying things new – investing in items with longer life expectancies to have value later in one of these malls.

Several UK schemes are demolishing parts of town centres, such as shopping centres, to replace them with housing. What are your perspectives on that?
JK: Bringing more people into town centres and cities is the most sustainable way of living. Paris works well because it has a level of density that can sustain the brasserie at the corner, butchers on the ground floor, cheesemongers next door and the person specialising in selling olives. The principle of densifying town centres, from an economic and environmental perspective, is sensible. Often in the UK, developers set rents for ground-floor retail at levels that only Tesco Express can afford. We often have to dismantle expectations to get organisations to see the real rental values. Maybe we should write off making lots of money from ground-floor rental and see these as places that contribute to public life, making upper-floor development attractive.

FL: I'm generally opposed to demolition. We find the generosity that you get from retail – ceiling heights, depths, column spans – are well adaptable to other uses. The head office of the property department for our developer client in Abu Dhabi is an abandoned department store in a mall. It's such a nice office. They agree 6m ceiling heights are cool to have. Then one of our clients in Dubai has a half-built abandoned shopping mall. The open space has the same dimensions as the Tate Modern turbine hall and the shop depths are the same as the main galleries. We're looking to convert it into Dubai Contemporary. In both instances, a lot of concrete was poured for retail that didn't come to pass. I would challenge anyone who's looking to demolish a shopping centre to let me show them how good those spans are. You can always densify something by demolishing 10 or 20% to make floor space for residential.

Friedrich, to wrap up on a positive note, is there an interesting perspective on retail you can share that's come out of ACME's Liverpool Street Station win?
FL: I've learned a lot about station retail over the last 10 years. We started working on Euston Station in 2018. Stations are valuable because there's a ginormous captive audience. You can finance whole projects based on additional retail. What quite often happens is that it starts to compete with the station itself so you get little kiosks, which prevent passengers getting on and off platforms. At Liverpool Street, we've tried to say that the basement concourse is for travel and the ground floor is for more retail. We've been able to make so much space for retail that we could buy the two balconies that get you from Liverpool Street to Exchange Square. This is really a public benefit project about connecting the city to the station that Network Rail would not otherwise do. It's a better station afterwards. ■