

# Why Bournemouth's Future Lies in Creativity and Collaboration



Words by  
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**B**ournemouth's town centre, much like many others across the UK, is grappling with critical challenges. The loss of national brands and local businesses, the closure of essential services and community spaces, and the presence of boarded-up shops are all contributing factors. These issues erode economic vitality, reduce social interaction, and weaken community identity. The situation stems from various economic and technological factors, including the rise of e-commerce and increased automation, leading to a downward spiral: the less we use and invest in these places, the more they degrade.

However, across Bournemouth, there is incredible social and cultural capital waiting to be leveraged: creative energy, innovative businesses and institutions, historic buildings and public gardens, and an outstandingly beautiful natural environment. Now is the time to embrace creative thinking and collective action to reimagine and revitalise the town centre. This "next phase" calls for moving beyond traditional retail models to foster a sustainable and inclusive urban environment.

## Creative placemaking in action

My own work spans the worlds of design, technology, and cities. I co-founded Assemble, the Turner Prize-winning architecture and design studio best

known for cultural projects and high-impact initiatives that promote agency between the public and the ways cities are conceived and made. Now, I'm the Creative Director at Patch, a start-up on a mission to build and support inspiring places for work, culture, and community connection.

Through my experiences, I have learned about the transformative power of a 'DIY' attitude and participatory approaches to placemaking, and I encourage more people to have greater confidence in helping to shape the spaces, places, and communities around them. This begins with amplifying existing creative enterprise. For instance, at Sugarhouse Studios in Stratford, Assemble built a theatrical studio space, turning an otherwise anonymous industrial yard into a cultural destination that celebrated local creative production.

So, what could be the future of Bournemouth's town centre? The potential to nurture and amplify existing cultural capital is immense. Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole are home to highly creative and entrepreneurial communities ready to further connect and enhance the town centre's identity and future. After all, a vibrant centre benefits everyone, and there's scope for many different stakeholders—residents, businesses, community groups, universities, cultural institutions, and the Council—all to contribute.



## How innovation is shaping Bournemouth's future

On an institutional level, spaces like AUB's Innovation Studio—a cutting-edge lab fostering creative entrepreneurship—showcase how local organisations can collaborate to spark new ideas and expand the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Similarly, public projects such as BCP's Environmental Innovation Hub at Durley Chine, designed by Bournemouth-based Footprint Architects using reclaimed materials, highlight sustainable civic guardianship of the coastline. These initiatives demonstrate how local efforts are combining creativity and innovation with environmental stewardship, authentically reflecting Bournemouth's unique character and contributing to a vibrant community with its own distinctive stamp.

## "Bournemouth's evolution into a vibrant cultural capital hinges on creative thinking and collective action."

Community building and placemaking don't always require large-scale moves. This journal—a celebration of culture and place—illustrates how thoughtful curation can elevate local creative networks. Another standout is the Bournemouth Writing Festival, hosted

in various town centre venues. Founded by Dominic Wong, its line-up of talks, workshops, and masterclasses by authors, journalists, screenwriters, and publishers inspires people of all ages and backgrounds to hone their writing skills. From an urban perspective, what's compelling is how, in a temporary yet impactful way, such initiatives envision a 'post-retail' future for the town centre, driven by creative production and cultural exchange.

## Bobby's reinvention: from department store to cultural destination

Building on these themes, Patch is set to launch a new hub for the South Coast's entrepreneurs, creatives, and community builders—right in the heart of Bournemouth. Due to open this autumn, and located on the first floor of Bobby's (formerly the Debenhams department store), Patch will combine coworking studios and start-up offices with publicly accessible spaces for workshops, talks, and events. This project is part of a larger programme, spearheaded by Verve and designed by Footprint, to transform Bobby's into a dynamic destination that combines retail, leisure, work, culture, and community. The reinvention of this building, shifting from a traditional retail focus to a new 'mixed-use' model deeply rooted in its locality, underscores how creative projects can generate meaningful social and economic value →



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The significance of Bobby's as an anchor project in a highly visible and much-loved building lies in its ability to bolster the town centre and the wider Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole ecosystem. By providing local employment, fostering community engagement, and enriching cultural life, initiatives like this are making Bournemouth an even more vibrant place to live, work, and play.

**The power of 'network effects': Bournemouth's collaborative evolution**

In the start-up world, 'network effects' refer to how the value of a product, service, or cultural practice increases as more people participate. This principle applies equally to places and communities, which become richer and more vibrant as engagement and contribution grow.

At Patch, we're creating a hub for local enterprise and a centre of creative and civic activity where

people come together to work, connect, and collaborate. Beyond workspace, our public spaces will also host a wide array of activities, from kids' craft workshops and cycle club meetups to podcast production sessions and start-up summits. By championing entrepreneurship, creativity, and community building, we're excited to partner with many different people and organisations to play a part in Bournemouth's cultural and economic future.

Bournemouth's evolution into a vibrant cultural capital hinges on creative thinking and collective action. To transcend the traditional retail model, we need a diverse mix of industries and perspectives to come together and collaborate. This isn't a top-down vision but a communal effort to craft a town centre that meets diverse needs, hosts new ventures, champions innovation, and inspires everyone. Together, we can create a town centre that thrives socially, culturally, and economically.

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