

Pedestrian Streets and Squares in Historic Towns and Cities: Design and Maintenance Issues in Europe

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Abstract

In 2003 the Council for European Urbanism declared that European cities were under threat from, amongst other things, a loss of regional and national cohesion, character and distinctiveness. The Council agreed twelve challenges for their organisation including:

- Degradation of public spaces;
- Public realm made from left over space;
- Car dominated transport;
- Indiscriminate road and street design; and
- Non-contextual guidelines and regulations in historic areas.

This problem is no more apparent than in many British historic towns and cities, as particularly highlighted in the English Historic Towns Forum publications "Focus on the Public Realm" (2004) and "Manual for Historic Streets" (2008).

In 2008 I was awarded a scholarship by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment to examine the management and maintenance of streets and squares in historic squares across Europe. I sought to understand the extent of the problem that the Council of European Urbanism had identified, to assess whether it was especially prevalent only in the UK and what examples of good practice existed across northern Europe that provide a better balance between the conservation of the local distinctiveness of the historic built environment and the management of the car.

Visits to around 25 historic towns and cities in Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland, with interviews with council officers, architects and urban designers has provided me with a directory of good practice covering a number of aspects relevant to the design and maintenance of streets and squares in historic urban environments.

It is clear from all the projects that there is a much more conscious effort to maintain high quality streets and squares in mainland European historic cities. Major investment is taking place for a number of reasons, primarily to manage the motor car, as well as preserving the historic environment. Public art and local distinctiveness play important roles in any designs and varied types of surfacing material are also apparent, sometimes reflecting local sources, but primarily imported in from other countries. Responsibility for the design of schemes has rested on a number shoulders, but it is clear that architectural practices play a significant role in the design and implementation of projects, whether employed by local authorities or as part of a tender process.

The 2003 declaration by the Council for European Urbanism is still very pertinent seven years on, but a pallet of good practice is out there once the decision makers in historic cities realise the importance of maintaining high quality public realm.

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Biography

Ian Poole is a town planner and has been a member of the Royal Town Planning Institute since 1990. Ian gained an honours degree in town planning at the University of the South Bank in London in 1990 and is currently Planning Policy & Specialist Services Manager at St Edmundsbury Borough Council in the East of England, where he manages the planning policy, urban design, conservation, trees and landscape and implementation functions of the Council. He was the project manager for the Bury St Edmunds Historic Core Zone pilot traffic management project in the late 1990's and, since then, has become a leading authority on the integration of traffic into the historic built environment.

In 2008 he was awarded a Travel Scholarship by CABE Space to study the design and management of streets and spaces in historic towns and cities across Europe. 25 cities and a few thousand photos later, Ian has built up a catalogue of examples of good practice that is being disseminated in talks and presentations across Europe for those seeking to resolve particular traffic and design issues in historic settings.

Ian has been a member of the Historic Towns Forum Executive for a number of years and was the Chair between 2004 and 2006. He was the editor of the Forums publications "Focus on the Public Realm" (2003) and "Manual for Historic Streets" (2008).

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Introduction

When we think of the historic cities across Europe we often think of landmark buildings, like Tower Bridge in London, the Eiffel Tower in Paris or the Coliseum in Rome. But the ability to admire those and all the other historic buildings in towns and cities across the world is provided by the space that surrounds them, providing the ability to view them as a whole, or in glimpses along streets and across squares. While those buildings might provide a focal point in the view, the quality of the space around them is of equal importance to the context of the building and its setting. However, it is apparent that the streets and spaces in historic towns and cities are not always afforded the same priorities of investment and care as the buildings themselves. "The spaces between buildings are fundamental to our perception of what makes places special; the proportion of time and effort given to the consideration of the public realm in comparison to historic buildings is disproportionate" (Dadson, 1999). Many architects recognise this connection. Jane Jacobs wrote of it in her great book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. "Think of a city and what comes to mind? Its streets. If a city's streets look interesting, the city looks interesting; if they look dull, the city looks dull" (Jacobs, 1993). The streets and squares of our historic towns and cities, and therefore the spaces surrounding our historic landmarks, are often older than the buildings themselves. Buildings burn down; streets don't. But, as the Council of European Urbanism declared at their Bruges Symposium in 2003, "European cities were under threat from, amongst other things, a loss of regional and national cohesion, character and distinctiveness" (CEU, 2003). They set 12 challenges to overcome, including:

- Degradation of public spaces;
- Public realm made from left over space;
- Car dominated transport;
- Indiscriminate road and street design; and
- Non-contextual guidelines and regulations in historic areas.

The challenges that they set their organisation should probably be heeded by all involved in the design, management and maintenance of streets and spaces in historic cities across Europe.

The Problem

It is important to put this problem in context. The City of Glasgow would probably acknowledge itself that it's not a major tourist destination. But their Tourism Strategy recognises the importance of providing physically attractive, accessible, welcoming and vibrant places which "influence the tourist to return time and time again" (Glasgow, 2007). They recognise the important role that the public realm has in the economy of the city, regardless of its historic background. Historically, the streets and public spaces of our cities have served numerous roles in defining the character and distinctiveness of London, compared to Paris or Brussels or New York. They are the glue that bound the city together; the places where pageants and processions have always been held and the venue for social interaction, rebellion and change. They have played a huge significance in the lives of so many but nevertheless are ignored and vandalised by so many different operators who use the public realm without regard for others. By this I mean those that provide services in or through the streets. Their selfish disregard for others, including the historic environment, is destroying their distinctiveness and having a knock on effect for the buildings that surround them.

The English Historic Towns Forum highlighted the problem in their publication "Focus on the Public Realm" (EHTF, 2003). Of 23 elements in the street scene in the UK, only eight elements required approval under legislation to be installed. Compare this to the buildings that surround streets in conservation area, where often the permitted development rights to replace windows is removed. The result is a degradation of our historic streets and spaces that results in clutter, a lack of coordination of street furniture, neglected and insensitive street furniture, pointless signs and lines. In the UK there is nobody in overall control of what happens to public spaces, unlike the owners of the buildings that surround them or, for that matter, the private spaces that are now occurring with more frequency.

Identifying Good Practice

Despite the gloomy picture painted above, there are good examples of investment in streets and squares in historic towns and cities across Europe that demonstrates recognition of their importance. In the United Kingdom, investment is being made that has restricted the dominance of the car, and everything that goes with it, to the benefit of an improved environment in which the distinctive historic character is respected. The Historic Core Zone project managed by the English Historic Towns Forum in the late 1990's has produced projects in four cities where the dominance of traffic signs and lines has been significantly reduced within the existing government legislation. The Bury St Edmunds Historic Core Zone project is one such example, where roads have been narrowed, pedestrian space increased, lines and signs either removed or reduced in size and, uniquely, traffic signs have been incorporated into public art. The result has been a reduction in traffic speeds, fewer accidents and greater freedom for pedestrians to move around.

Travel Scholarship

However, the pallet of good practice across Europe is much more varied and extensive. The remainder of this paper examines some of the examples from my travel scholarship awarded by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment in 2008. The purpose of the scholarship was to examine the management and maintenance of streets and squares in historic squares across Europe. I sought to understand the extent of the problem that the Council of European Urbanism had identified, to assess whether it was especially prevalent only in the UK and what examples of good practice existed across northern Europe that provide a better balance between the conservation of the local distinctiveness of the historic built environment and the management of the car. In examining case studies, I wanted to have some form of benchmark to provide a common framework for assessing whether the interventions worked. I used as a reference the work by Gehl Architects looking at quality for pedestrians and talked about by Lars Gemzøe at the Walk21 conference in Melbourne in 2006. Their "Key Word List for Designing and detailing Public Spaces", contained in his paper and reproduced in Table 1 below, helps designers turn a space into a "100% place" where "people will be able to use all their human senses and enjoy walking as well as staying" (Gemzøe, 2006).

Table 1: Designing/Detailing Public Spaces: Key Word List

PROTECTION	1. Protection against traffic and accidents	2. Protection against crime & violence (feeling of safety)	3. Protection against unpleasant sense experiences
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protection for pedestrians • Eliminating fear of traffic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lively public realm • Eyes on the street • Overlapping functions day and night • Good lighting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wind • Rain/snow • Cold/heat • Pollution • Dust/noise/glare

COMFORT	4. Possibilities for WALKING <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Room for walking • Interesting facades • No obstacles • Good surfaces • Accessibility for everyone 	5. Possibilities for STANDING / STAYING <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Edge effect / attractive zones for standing / staying • Supports for standing • Facades with good details that invite staying 	6. Possibilities for SITTING <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zones for sitting • Utilizing advantages: view, sun, people • Good places to sit • Benches for resting
	7. Possibilities to SEE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reasonable viewing distances • Unhindered views • Interesting views • Lighting (when dark) 	8. Possibilities for HEARING / TALKING <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low noise levels • Street furniture that provide "talkscapes" 	9. Possibilities for PLAY / UNFOLDING / ACTIVITIES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical activity, exercise • Play and street entertainment • By day and night • In summer and winter
ENJOYMENT	10. Scale <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Buildings and spaces designed to human scale 	11. Possibilities for enjoying positive aspects of climate <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sun/shade • Heat/coolness • Shelter from wind/breeze 	12. Aesthetic quality / positive sense experiences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good design and detailing • Good materials • Fine views • Trees, plants, water

(Gemzoe, 2006)

Examples

The scholarship involved visits to the following historic towns and cities in Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland, with interviews with council officers, architects and urban designers. The following cities were visited.

Belgium

Antwerp
Gent
Mechelen
Namur
St Niklaas

Denmark

Copenhagen
Odense

Germany

Bamberg
Nurenburg

France

Besancon
Bordeaux
Dijon
Lyon

Netherlands

Delft
Drachten
S'Hertogenbosch
Utrecht
Zutphen

Norway

Trondheim

Sweden

Kalmar
Visby, Gotland

Switzerland

Berne
Biel-Bienne
St Gallen
Zurich

Findings

It is not possible in a short paper of this nature to cover all the findings of my research. Instead, I will concentrate on presenting a variety of solutions which provide an insight into the approaches to maintaining and managing streets and squares in historic cities. The complete findings are still being prepared and will be available on a dedicated website (www.historicstreets.org.uk) in the near future.

Strategic approach

It is apparent that many cities have taken a long term view towards managing movement in historic streets. The realisation that, in many cases, the streets were not designed for use by motor vehicles has forced many cities to examine the role of their streets and manage movement. One such example is s'Hertogenbosch in the Netherlands where a strategy was adopted in the early 1990's to remove through traffic from the historic centre and return the streets to pedestrians and other users. As a result, as the removal strategy has been implemented it has provided the opportunities for investment in the regeneration of the historic streets. A similar approach was taken in Zurich, where a public space strategy "City Spaces 2010" was developed by Jan Gehl Architects between 2004 and 2006 and more and more large cities are also following suit.

In each case the city adopting a strategic approach has been able to have a long term vision about the use and management of its historic streets and these are often supplemented by a design framework that provides a pallet of materials to be used when improvement work takes place.

Design input

The professional input and role of local councils in procuring and managing the design of improvements is significantly relevant to the outcome and quality of the scheme. In the UK there is evidence that highway engineers play a major role in the design of schemes, whereas evidence from Europe suggests that architects normally play the main role in design and that they co-ordinate the delivery of projects. In a number of examples, private sector architects are commissioned and this process potentially brings in expertise from around the World. While this approach can secure a high quality team to design and deliver the project, there is a danger that the architects' signature design approach can be repeated rather than delivering a project that contains an element of local distinctiveness. In Namur, in Belgium, a local architectural practice was commissioned to design a number of projects in the city centre and they have brought their local knowledge and understanding of place to the design solution. In contrast, other cities employed internationally renowned architectural practices to design improvement schemes, such as Mechelen, also in Belgium, where Studio Bernardo Secchi, Paola Viganò were employed to design the regeneration of the Grotemarkt and Veemarket squares in the centre of the city. Both projects have delivered high quality schemes in respect of design and the use of materials. In contrast, a lighting scheme in s'Hertogenbosch designed by the Beth Gali studio has a similar approach to that designed by the same studio for Patrick Street in Cork.

It is clear that, whatever the intent of the commissioning body, the quality and distinctiveness of the outcome will be dependent upon the content of the brief. It could be argued that this calls for as much careful consideration as the design of the scheme itself.

Enabling Movement

Historic streets in city centres are used by a variety of types of user by a number of different modes. The challenge for the designer is to enable movement by those that require it but without the exclusion or disadvantaging others. The use of stone setts is an almost universal design solution in historic cities. When used as rough finish in the carriageway they're unevenness can be a contributory factor in helping reduce traffic speeds. However, they can also be deterrents to cyclists, pedestrians and those using mobility scooters or children's buggies. A number of examples were witnessed where simple design solutions used a mix of materials that slowed motor vehicles as well as enabling the ease of movement by other users. One such example was in Bamberg in Germany where major investment in the street enhancements are taking place with a view to attracting investment into the surrounding buildings. The surface material uses setts which are rough tumbles finished on either side of the street, with a sawn smooth row of setts along the centre to facilitate ease of movement for cyclists, pushchairs and for those that find it uncomfortable on uneven finishes. The overall aesthetic feel of the completed scheme is one of a consistent material but the subtle change in surface provides equal access opportunities for all users. In Trondheim a slightly different approach is taken in a one way street. Nygata is a historic residential street where a new surface of large rounded setts has been laid. Such setts would have prohibitive effect on the use of the street by cyclists were it not for the laying of smooth slabs in each gutter area. The result is two smooth channels where cyclists can move with ease, but wide enough apart to exclude the possibility of a car running both all wheels along them, thereby ensuring car speeds remain low.

Shared Space

The construction of shared space in cities has been a much publicised project in recent years. However, it is clear that shared surfaces have existed in historic cities for a number of years without detrimental impact on safety. I witnessed particular streets where cars and pedestrians shared the same space in Nuremberg, Bamberg, Visby and Berne, as well as a junction where the edges had been "blurred" in Biel-Bienne. Although different approaches were employed to overcome the same issues, the removal of lines and signs and the formal segregation between vehicles and pedestrians was clearly having an effect of slowing vehicles down and enabling pedestrians, cyclists and, albeit a limited number of motor vehicles to move around in a setting that paid greater respect to the historic environment.

Public Art

The placing and design of street furniture, such as benches, litter bins, railings and information points can have a significantly positive or negative impact on the historic built environment. The use of "catalogue" street furniture can result in a lack of local distinctiveness and everywhere looking the same. However, it is apparent that some historic cities have sought to overcome this problem. For example, Bury St Edmunds has used public art to necessary house traffic signs as well as designing and commissioning bollards and railings unique to the historic town centre. In Odense, the home of Hans Christian Andersen, bollards, litter bins, benches and other street furniture across the historic centre have taken on a theme from Andersons tales. They are designed and manufactured locally and certainly provide a sense of distinctiveness not found anywhere else.

The same city has use a water feature to not only form a piece of public art at the termination of a pedestrianised street, but the sound of the water drowns out the noise of a busy road beyond. The more traffic there is passing, the faster (and therefore louder) the water flows. A similar

approach has been used in the Place de la Liberation in Dijon, where fountains not only create a focal point in the square, but also help drown out the noise from passing buses.

Minimal Road Markings

The excessive use of road markings and signs has recently been highlighted as a major problem in historic towns and cities across the UK. However, there are examples of good practice across Europe where, although lines are required to define a carriageway or stop lines on it, paint has not been used. For example, in Odense, aluminium discs are used to define the centre line and stop lines in an enhancement scheme in Klingenberg, adjoin the city cathedral. In Bamberg, aluminium discs have been used to define the carriageway in Domplatz, creating a feeling of a square in which traffic is allowed to pass through rather than one dominated by the signs and lines so often associated with the management of vehicles.

Lessons Learned

There are many examples of good practice in managing traffic in historic streets and squares across Europe that provide lessons for those tasked with implementing projects to reduce the domination of traffic in historic cities and maintain a feeling of local distinctiveness. Generally, the research that I have undertaken thus far has demonstrated that:

- There is a recognition of the value of investing in high quality design, materials and construction techniques;
- The car is subservient in historic cores and has to compete for space with other users of the space;
- In planning and designing schemes, we are not planning for the ultimate use of the space but for the needs of the current generation. The space has adapted and changed to circumstances over hundreds of years;
- Public art can play a functional as well as aesthetic role;
- Shared space is happening without it necessarily being labelled "shared space"; and
- There needs to be a consideration to protecting streets and squares as well as the British practice of protecting historic buildings.

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