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Radical new public realm emerging in UK city centres

By James Evison

New shared space areas are continuing to be built throughout the UK, as the Exhibition Road scheme in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea has proved.

Building on the principles of the Ashford ring road project – where pedestrians, cyclists and motorists share a single sur-

face – the scheme in Exhibition Road is the first time such principles have been widely drawn upon in the Capital. Exhibition Road also adds to the remit set out in the official government advice of Manual for Streets 2 – which calls for a reduction in ‘street clutter’ to achieve better, more attractive spaces.

Communities secretary, Eric Pickles, has also assisted the argument by calling for unnecessary signage and furniture to be re-

moved. Shared space expert Ben Hamilton-Baillie said of schemes such as Exhibition Road: ‘Many items of established streetscape infrastructure, such as the pedestrian guard-rail, belong to a rapidly disappearing age.’

‘Future generations will look back in amazement at how much expensive clutter we loaded onto our precious public realm in the misguided and vain belief that it would somehow keep society safe and in place.’

- Shared space schemes like Exhibition Road are creating a radical re-think in the management of traffic.



The Royal Revolution

It is a well-known fact that the shared-space scheme in Ashford has been a trailblazer in the UK. Now another project is setting a new benchmark: Exhibition Road in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.

The difference between the Ashford scheme and Exhibition Road is both obvious and very important. Ashford ring-road is a high traffic area, but not near the density expected on Exhibition Road in the heart of London - a space which has the Science, Natural History and Victoria and Albert Museum along it.

The philosophy is the same as Ashford. The single surface design is kerb-free with the minimum of street furniture. By having a less distinct 'track' for through-traffic, the council believe motorists will drive 'more cautiously and slowly, with greater awareness and consideration for pedestrians'.

Shared space expert, Ben Hamilton-Baillie, said: 'Schemes like Ashford Ringroad and Brighton's New Road, along with Exhibition Road and Kensington High Street in London, have already established a new paradigm for urban streetscapes.'

This is not an ideology away from the centre of government either. The principles of shared space are found in Manual for Streets 2, guidance from the Department for Transport.

Interestingly, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea don't believe the scheme is actually shared space. A spokesman said: 'We don't really class Exhibition Road as a 'shared space' though there is no definition for what shared space actually means. In Exhibition Road there is no traditional kerb upstand separating the

The shared space revolution is here, and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea is set to be at the heart of the radical step-change in public realm works. **James Evison** reports.

pedestrian space from the vehicular traffic, but there are distinct zones.

'In that sense it might not be considered to be 'pure' in the same way as say a granite sett mews which has no delineation between vehicle space and pedestrian space. We believe a level paved area will make the road more accessible, particularly for people in wheelchairs.'

The spokesman also said upgrades on Exhibition Road include, alongside the single surface, no barriers or 'street clutter', what the council describes as 'visual and tactile lines to distinguish pedestrian areas from those used by vehicles', a 20mph speed limit, and new street lighting.

Simplicity and subtlety are key to good shared space, and architects Dixon Jones achieved this.

Peter Wear, managing director of Woodhouse - suppliers of lighting columns on the project - explained: 'When Dixon Jones won the contract to design the scheme, the key philosophy was simplicity with a subtle, minimal look.'

Tall, sleek street lighting masts have been specifically designed to complement the

buildings and provide a safe nocturnal environment for residents and visitors.

'Our job on the scheme was to get the lighting to come downwards rather than down the side. The 23 metre tall street light is very simple and like a needle. All of the lighting provided is white light.'

'We have been working for years with Dixon Jones, so it was fairly straightforward to work with them and fulfil their design objectives.'

This simplicity of design fits in with communities secretary Eric Pickles' objective of removing street furniture and 'decluttering' the public realm.

Hamilton-Baillie elucidated: 'Many items of established streetscape infrastructure, such as the traffic signal, pelican crossing or pedestrian guardrail, belong to a rapidly disappearing age.'

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Indeed, safety isn't an issue. Wide 'corduroy' strips of tactile paving provide clear signals for blind and partially sighted people, what the council called 'a Department for Transport approved pattern'. The council spokesman said this was being 'professionally tested' to ensure Guide Dogs are satisfied with the result for blind and partially sighted people.

The revolution is here. Hamilton-Baillie concluded: 'The idea of traffic engineering as a distinct profession, distanced from urban design, landscape architecture and the rest of urbanism, has now vanished.' ●