What is Shared Space?

“Shared space” is a term used to describe an emerging approach to urban design, traffic engineering and road safety in Europe and, increasingly, in North America. It was coined in 2003 following research by the author in 2000 that identified a common thread in the approach of a number of countries on how to reduce the adverse impacts of traffic in towns.

The concept has developed further in Denmark, Northern Holland, Sweden and Northern Spain than elsewhere in Europe, although the French programme “Ville plus sure” adopts many of the key principles and is evident in countless towns and villages across France. Its adoption in the UK is very recent, and there are, to date, very few examples on the ground of projects that consciously define themselves as “shared space”.

However, shared space could also be seen as the default mode before the separation of vehicles and pedestrians became the accepted approach to designing public spaces. It was the status quo ante for most streets and public spaces before the introduction of segregation during the last century. Visit any Italian hill town, such as Siena, or most smaller Mediterranean settlements, and shared space will be evident in any traditional streetscapes where modern traffic engineering has yet to have an impact. Even today in the UK, almost all car parks, courtyards, mews developments, market places, village squares, campsites and country lanes involve the informal sharing of space for different uses and by different modes of movement. From this perspective, shared space is nothing new.

At the heart of shared space is the concept of integration. This contrasts to the principle of segregation, the idea of separating different functions and different users within the urban landscape. The idea of segregation can be traced back to the urban visions of Le Corbusier in the 1930’s, and was formalised into government policy following the “Buchanan Report” – Traffic in Towns, published in 1963. Pedestrianised precincts, underpasses, overbridges, barriers and controlled crossings are all manifestations of the principle of segregation, which continues to underpin most conventional traffic engineering schemes in the UK.
Shared space remains, for most people in the UK, a hypothetical concept, full of uncertainties and unpredictable outcomes. It is often confused with other concepts, such as pedestrian zones, shared surfaces, traffic calming and the like. To date, most schemes are at an early stage of design. Established precedents exist in a few locations, where conventional traffic engineering solutions have been replaced by simpler, more integrated, solutions. These include:

- **Kensington High Street**, West London. Improvements to a busy radial route and shopping street by the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea

- **Seven Dials, Covent Garden**. This busy intersection of seven roads, just south of Shaftsbury Avenue, encourages informal pedestrian activity and interaction with traffic. The podium of the elegant sundial needle serves as a sitting out area on what would otherwise be a roundabout.

- **Poundbury**, Dorchester, Dorset. The streets of this innovative urban extension have deliberately avoided the signs, markings, barriers and long sight-lines traditionally imposed on such developments.

- **Blackett Street**, Grainger Town, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. A busy pedestrian area incorporates a busy bus corridor serving the centre of the city.

- **Ancoats / New Islington**, Manchester. A major redevelopment of a large inner-city neighbourhood, now nearing completion

The lack of adequate and appropriate solutions to current circumstances is reflected in growing public dissatisfaction with the status quo. Numerous public agencies and government advisory bodies draw attention to the problems associated with an increasingly cluttered and
chaotic public realm. Shared space represents the most significant new philosophy to challenge the principle of segregation, and to open up new opportunities to develop a more inclusive and accessible environment.

Shared space is not, ultimately, defined by the design or configuration of the built environment. Design and detailing are important, but only as a catalyst to changing the way in which people interact within the public realm. At such an early stage in its development, there is a daunting learning curve ahead of all those involved in the design, management and use of our streets and public spaces. Moving away from established practice requires determination, careful thought and observation, and the courage to explore and refine new solutions. The input of all street users, particularly those with disabilities, into this process at this early stage will be vital as a new philosophy for the design of the public realm evolves.

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\[1\] Home Zones: Reconciling People, Places and Transport. Published by Harvard University Graduate School of Design. Loeb Fellowship. 2001
www.gsd.harvard.edu/professional/loeb_fellowship/sponsored_sites/home_zones/index.html

\[2\] See, for example, Save our Streets. English Heritage, 2004.
www.english-heritage.org.uk/server/show/nav.8680