

LEARNING TO LOVE SHARED SPACE

Five years ago in Ashford, Kent, an innovative public realm and traffic management scheme was set in motion. In late summer 2010, as the scheme ‘beds down’, lead designer Whitelaw Turkington revisits the project to celebrate successes and consider the practical lessons learned. By [Juliana O’Rourke](#)

ASHFORD: CHALLENGING CONVENTIONS

The Ashford scheme challenged conventional ways of building highways by reclaiming significant areas of public realm once dominated by heavy traffic on the major A292 three-lane Ashford ring road – otherwise known as the ‘race track’ – for use by a mix of pedestrians, cyclists, motorcyclists, buses, taxis and all public realm users. The first phase of the project was completed in November 2008.

Shared space removes the traditional segregation of motor vehicles, pedestrians and other road users, creating quality, two-way streets in which drivers, cyclists and pedestrians have equal priority. Conventional road priority management systems and devices such as kerbs, yellow and white lines, road signs and traffic signals are replaced with an integrated, people-oriented public space.

Although demonstrably successful in terms of civic benefit and road safety, shared space remains controversial: as it gains in popularity and acceptance across the UK – the recently published *Manual for Streets 2* (MfS2) includes a call for the de-cluttering of UK streets – its design, scale and implementation remain hotly debated issues. At a RUDI-organised event in summer 2010 – one of a series of such events – Whitelaw Turkington, lead designer of the Ashford project’s Integrated Design Team (IDT), invited a range of urban, landscape and highways practitioners, politicians, policymakers and representatives of the blind and disabled to Ashford to explore and use the shared space and to share knowledge and ideas about how it works, and how to make it better: key issues are discussed in the following pages.

‘There is no doubt,’ says Ashford advisor and urban movement specialist Ben Hamilton Baillie, ‘that when the history of urbanism and public space is written, the scheme in Ashford will be seen as an important landmark...the first large-scale scheme to consciously tackle a major traffic issue through shared space...’.

For Hamilton Baillie, shared space is a much bigger issue than highway rules and traffic flows. ‘It’s about how we facilitate civility’, he states. The background to Ashford is a landmark shift from streets that are tightly regulated and expensively controlled to ones that rely on the highly developed ability of humans to interact. It’s only relatively recently that we’ve attempted to segregate street and highway uses, he says. Shared space is, for Ashford’s design team, a one-time norm rather than an intrinsically innovative concept.

But although informal or shared spaces – and the good behaviour of those who use them – are familiar from any provincial market square or car park, when highways are concerned most drivers have become fully accustomed to segregation and control, complete with a familiar language of signs, yellow lines, white lines and flashing lights. As with so many issues of urban development in a changing world, learning to love shared space is just as much about behaviour change, clear communication and personal responsibility as getting the design, budgets, delivery and management right.

GETTING THE DETAILS RIGHT

Yet getting the details right is, of course, very important – for local residents, for visitors, for politicians and for local authorities. Hamilton Baillie warns that shared space schemes will rarely be popular in their first months, as they take time to ‘bed down’. Yet getting the details right from the outset goes a long way to gaining positive acceptance: a fact that the Ashford Integrated

Design Team (IDT) freely acknowledges. There are several obvious and very important, big wins: traffic speeds halved to around 20 mph or less, no serious traffic incidents reported since November 2008, the creation of a series of popular new public spaces such as Elwick Square with its totally shared surface. In addition, the creation of attractive rain gardens to calm a residential section of the old ring road, and the delivery of a SUD system in an adopted highway are positive achievements, yet it’s clear that many non-designers have other priorities – and that these need to be acknowledged and discussed. The resistance of blind, partially sighted and disabled people has not been overcome by involvement in extensive consultation, and issues of lax parking enforcement, poor maintenance and confusion over funding have become priorities for some Ashford residents.

‘For me,’ says Lindsey Whitelaw, ‘because it was four or five years ago when we were designing this scheme, we didn’t know about mixed messages.’ In one or two parts of the scheme, she says, ‘for example at County Square, we were asked to put in a feeder lane for access to car parking and, as a result, the design



Elwick Road, alias ‘the racetrack’, before the transformation