



Establishing new behaviour: One lesson learned is that it is vital to establish new patterns of use at the outset, as the way a scheme is used from its day one will tend to persist. Ashford opted for a restricted parking zone: a reversal of traditional enforcement practice in that lines and signage designate permitted parking practice, and no lines or signage means no parking whatsoever. The unfamiliarity of this approach for many drivers, plus the time taken to introduce appropriate gateway signage, led to problems with parking enforcement from day one. A new approach agreed between highways authorities will see new enforcement practice begin in summer 2010. 'We need to be really careful on the restricted zones,' says Kent County Council highways engineer Jamie Watson, a member of the IDT. 'We need ongoing education'



There is an emerging language here: low speed areas, transition zones, visual narrowing. I'm hoping that we can develop a common language between engineers, urban designers, landscape architects and all others to apply these principles, and so improve accessibility throughout our towns

Ben Hamilton Baillie, urban movement specialist



Greening and SUDs: Reed beds filter the water run-off from the hard paved areas. The water is filtered and attenuated, with any surplus fed back into the drainage system. Future plans aim to recycle the water for watering the reed beds and other planting areas. In West Street, the IDT worked with the residents to create a central green and SUDs feature, with seating and crossing points, in what was once the centre of a busy road. Maintenance has been an issue in Ashford, although much of Elwick Square, and the SUD system reed beds, have been designed for minimal maintenance. Maintaining the granite surfaces has proven to be the biggest challenge for the highway authority, which is continuing to explore the best options

how we could change this place, and putting Ashford on the map.'

Whitelaw and the design team stress that local authorities simply cannot deliver successful shared space schemes if major divisions between internal departments – highways, landscape and maintenance – involved in the public realm remain. Directors and politicians must learn, as in Ashford, how to overcome these boundaries. When collaborative working takes place, true placemaking happens. 'The new spaces are also about economic viability,' says Theresa Trussell, Kent County Council. 'We needed to break down the ring road as it cut up the town and impeded development. It forced locals to drive into town. We needed to show that we could 'mend before extend'; to increase Ashford's marketability and to attract quality development.'

The best thing from shared space expert Hamilton Baillie's point of view is that the Ashford scheme is up and running, and working well. 'It provides a precedent and a basis for experimentation and questioning in the UK, which we have desperately needed for many years,' he says. Judith Armit, managing director of Ashford's Future, the agency overseeing Ashford's £2.5bn public and private sector growth programme, said: 'This bold approach to urban planning has made our town centre more attractive and accessible. It is playing a key role in unlocking the development potential of Ashford and, above all, it has improved road safety.'

INCLUSIVE DESIGN

Whilst recognising that extensive consultation did happen in Ashford, Geraint Evans from Guide Dogs still feels that the design is excluding some users. He supports the general principles of shared space: 'slowing the traffic down, improving the space, and giving ownership back to the pedestrian, I think it sounds brilliant...' However he still has concerns about the removal of pedestrian crossings in Ashford (there is one light-controlled pedestrian crossing) and the introduction of courtesy crossings.

'These crossings rely on eye contact, which for certain disabled people, visually impaired people in particular, is very difficult,' he says. Hamilton Baillie and the IDT do not necessarily agree. There is a widespread misunderstanding that to successfully navigate shared space pedestrians need to make eye contact, says Hamilton Baillie. 'It isn't true. What we designers are aiming to do is to change the brain processing of the driver.'