

Responsibility for actions and safety is being passed to individuals, and that process is, by definition, uncomfortable, he adds. 'If we don't feel completely safe using the space, then so much the better. Because there's traffic about, and traffic isn't safe. The worst thing is to establish a false sense of security, for example at pelican crossings, because that way you're likely to expose yourself to greater danger.'

Drivers anticipate pedestrian movement, and eye contact is not essential. One of the ways of testing this – which several members of the study group engaged with – is to simply walk backwards into the space. There was much discussion of the civility of the majority of drivers, and the instinctive care with which most of them crossed the shared spaces. The majority of pedestrians and cyclists that RUDI spoke with were also very pleased with the new spaces – as are the local police. Says Chief Inspector John Frayne, Area Commander, Ashford: 'Since its completion, the shared space project has been very successful. There has been only one minor road traffic collision between a car and a lamp-post. Measures are being implemented to prevent selfish and dangerous parking, but, on the whole, both pedestrians and drivers are using the space responsibly.'

We have to constantly assess, suggest shared space advocates, whether the spectacular reductions in speed that shared space brings outweigh the loss of certainty that goes with the loss of formal pedestrian crossings. 'I feel confident that we can build on Ashford to overcome some of the concerns voiced by visually impaired people,' says Whitelaw. 'There may be new design details or technologies, or there may be different patterns of behaviour for all parties that take longer than a couple years to change. I think we're at the early stages of a long learning curve, and we've very much taken up that challenge by organising an ongoing series of workshops and study groups. Our aim is to explore design techniques that would help everybody to enjoy shared space, without losing the overall philosophy.'

Recession or no recession, cutbacks or not, we will continue to spend a great deal of money on public space and streets. A clear consensus about what qualities and what characteristics we are aiming for can help inform that process and make sure that the investment, wherever it is, whenever it comes, and from whatever source can be channelled in a consistent way.

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Accessibility: A constant flow of pedestrians and cyclists cross Elwick Square. A huge additional benefit for Ashford residents is the new social space: locals and visitors 'hang out' in and use the square in ways that would have been unthinkable in the days of the former ring road. New development planned for the south side of Elwick Square and Elwick Road will see tall buildings begin to enclose the large open space, matching the space's tall, iconic lamp columns