

The north terrace of the square is a heavily used pedestrian thoroughfare. During the day the pervasive presence of street performers adds to the liveliness of the space (Figure 10.6). As the day turns to afternoon and to evening and night the ambience becomes far more alcohol-based as drinks can be seen and smelt all over the square. By late night the area has built up to a raucous feel, which, on occasions, becomes unpleasant and intimidating.

The gardens in the centre of the square are typical of London's Georgian squares today, in that the layout of the square is community- and civil-minded with many benches and low walls for sitting on. Further symbolism is added through the two statues and four busts in the gardens. The Victorian and typically British elements are the grass, tall trees, flowerbeds and serpentine paths, all enclosed by iron railings.

The architecture of the surrounding buildings speaks little of the rich history of Leicester Square for, like the gardens, it dates only as far back as the late nineteenth century. Cinema replaced theatre as the main form of entertainment in the 1930s, and still features prominently around the square. The square is dominated by the 1930s art deco Odeon Leicester Square on the east side, and more recently the Alhambra Theatre. On the north side there is the Empire Theatre, which was one of the first cinemas in London in 1896. On the south side is the Odeon West End, dating from the 1920s. On the west side there is a low-rise office block, the Communications Building. The building heights are much lower than Times Square with no building rising beyond 10 storeys, the tallest structure being the tower of the Odeon Leicester Square.

Coventry Street leads from Leicester Square in the east, through to Piccadilly Circus in the west, in what feels like a dynamic pedestrian thoroughfare (Figure 10.7). Walking from Leicester Square the first space is Swiss Court with the Swiss Centre to the north. The court is cobbled and at the time of survey contained several unlicensed henna tattooists. The Swiss Centre contains offices above ground floor, with a small cinema and nightclub. The ground floor use of the centre is dominated by low-quality tourist shops. On the side of the centre is a clock and several times a day a mechanical procession with music moves along the face of the building. Further along Coventry Street is the Trocadero Centre, an entertainment mall with shops, cafés, cinema, games arcades, and a funfair. The overall feeling of the street is of movement and entertainment, the latter as much from the colour and diversity of the street life, as from the various global-type destinations that line its edges.

Piccadilly Circus is a shock to the senses after Leicester Square and Coventry Street due to the huge flow of traffic. The wide pavement around the famous Eros statue and the Criterion Theatre building – now mainly occupied by Lillywhites sports shop – are obvious magnets for tourists and visitors, whilst the pedestrianised space and the Eros statue still



10.6 Portrait artists in Leicester Square



10.7 Coventry Street



10.8 Piccadilly Circus: a place of movement