In the twentieth century, cinemas replaced the theatres but while these flourished the square declined as a public space, dominated by traffic which impeded access to the gardens. Only in the 1990s did Westminster City Council undertake a redesign of the square and the gardens. Leicester Square was pedestrianised and reinvented with an American flavour, including bright lights, glitzy movie premieres, funfair rides, and celebrity concrete handprints in the pavement. A statue of Charlie Chaplin was placed in the gardens to invoke the entertainment tradition of the square.

Today the area has a reputation for danger, excitement, and debauchery, as well as the attraction of its major cinemas. This is in keeping with a history where the respectable and dissolute have inhabited the same space. Westminster Council approved an action plan in 2002 aimed at regenerating the square and surrounding area, a repetition of the cycle of 'plans' and redevelopments through the square's long history. The action plan implemented changes in management to control who can use the square, and what activities are allowed, and followed a 'zero tolerance' campaign by the local police and Westminster Council. It has now been supplemented by the designation of a 'business improvement district' (BID) in the surrounding area, formed in 2005 to support business interests by tackling the square's complex management problems (see Chapter 10 for a detailed discussion and analysis).

PRIVATE – AND PUBLIC – EXCLUSION

Despite demonstrating that on occasions, the private sector can be the root cause of neglect, the history of Leicester Square remains distinct from London's other residential squares. The history of these squares generally demonstrate the deep-seated desire of some sections of society to restrict access to certain types of public space; extending in the case of Bloomsbury to whole neighbourhoods (echoing the debates over gated communities today). Planned public space was for the privileged few, and, initially at least, there was no recognition that the design and aesthetics of urban public space could foster civility and health among the masses, as was widely accepted in continental Europe.

In one respect Leicester Square does typify many of London's other residential squares, where the public sector (as opposed to the private) is now increasingly behind attempts to restrict user freedom in the broader 'public interest'. While Bloomsbury's streets and many of its squares are now in the public domain, being owned and managed by the local authority, restrictions on behaviour through a host of restrictive bye-laws still remain. Increasingly council-owned squares such as Russell, Bloomsbury and Gordon Squares have had their design and management altered to deter the homeless, beggars, street vendors and homosexuals who, until recently, used to cruise there.

So, in one form or another, restrictions remain, effectively deterring certain cultural and social groups. The story illustrates how another type of public space has been gradually transformed, first by way of a transition from an elite space type to a shared space, but latterly, through restrictions on use, designed to curb some of the perceived excesses of the users to whom the space has been opened up.

Civic space: display and public gathering

The final type of space represents the various forms of space that exist primarily for gathering and display. Classic examples include two of London's most famous spaces, Trafalgar Square and Piccadilly Circus.

GATHERING AND CIVIC DISPLAY

When designed and built, Trafalgar Square was the only purpose-built public square in central London. A space that is framed by the cultural institution of the National Gallery, it contains the symbolism of a bygone empire, and has a history of public gatherings of demonstration and celebration. The square was conceived by the architect John Nash as part of plans for the beautification of the vistas around Charing Cross.

Mace (1976: 31–42) notes that Nash first proposed the project in his report of 1812, but the project was formalised by an act of parliament in 1826 to enable the public purchase of land for the creation of a 'large splendid quadrangle … to embellish and adorn the metropolis'. The new space was to have strict rules to prevent commercialisation with a fine of 20 shillings a day for 'all signs or other Emblems, used to denote Trade, Occupation, or Calling of any Person or Persons'. The National Gallery, established in 1824, was in need of a new building as it was growing out of its premises at Pall Mall. It was John Nash in his original plan who suggested that an institution could be placed on the north side of the new space, in so doing helping to frame it. The National Gallery was to turn the square into a cultural space, and was eventually completed by William Wilkins in 1840.

There had been much discussion of a monument to commemorate the death of Nelson and the British victory at Trafalgar, but this was independent of the newly named square. Nelson's Column was seen as a fitting tribute, and the new public Trafalgar Square had the name to fit. Charles Barry, who became the chief architect of the scheme protested that it would be out of scale with surrounding buildings, particularly the new National Gallery, and would block the vista. Nevertheless Nelson's Column was erected in 1842.