



IHT Awards 2008: Transport for London Urban Design Award Brighton & Hove City Council (BHCC) - New Road Environmental Enhancement

Introduction

New Road was created in the 18th century and is at the heart of the city's Cultural Quarter, providing direct access to world famous destinations including the Pavilion, Lanes and North Laine area, Jubilee Library, Theatre Royal, The Dome and Brighton Museum.

Next to these illustrious neighbours, the New Road ambience was comparatively utilitarian. Despite relatively low volumes of through traffic, New Road was a typical example of an area automatically designed to prioritise vehicles rather than people. The area was dominated by a wide carriageway and associated clutter that left little room for people to enjoy what the area had to offer.

This submission sets out the approach which has enabled Brighton's New Road to be transformed from a traffic-dominated, underused street to one of the most popular pedestrian places in the city.

Policy approach and Design Intentions

BHCC's Local Transport plan assimilates the latest thinking and best practice from around Europe which suggests that the quality of the urban realm is instrumental in encouraging people to walk, rest, play and otherwise enjoy the city on foot. The redesign of New Road is the first in a number of Urban Realm improvements based on 'shared space' concepts taken forward in Holland and elsewhere. Vehicles are allowed at all times but the character of the street signals pedestrian priority.

New Road has become a best practise example for consultation & partnership working, de-cluttering, challenging automatic priority of design in favour of vehicular traffic and creation of democratic space reflecting the needs of the city's diverse population

Initiated by Brighton & Hove City Council and led by Gehl Architects and Landscape Projects, scheme design was informed by a detailed understanding of how people used, and wanted to use the site and its surrounding areas.

Project Approach

New Road utilises a shared surface approach which maintains access for all transport modes, but returns priority to people rather than vehicles. The design incorporates natural stone paving materials: carefully selected for colour mix, strength, durability and slip resistance. The chosen stone provides a sympathetic background to the varying architectural styles in the street and announces the space as an elongated public square rather than a traditional street. 50,000 slabs of hard-wearing granite were used to pave New Road with a combined weight of over 1000 tonnes.

New Road dispenses with traditional kerbs, instead using subtle pattern and street furniture to indicate the vehicle route, signalling to drivers that pedestrians and cyclists have equal priority. The project successfully challenges traditional requirements for “excessive” signing and lining and obtained DfT approval to limit signs to 5 posts and remove all lining from the scheme.

Bespoke wooden benches run the length of the road, creating a striking border between the road and Pavilion Gardens and also a peaceful environment for sitting and resting. The benches incorporate an array of colour-changing pulsating lights designed by local artist Esther Rolinson which enhance the area’s night-time character.

Impact (Adaptation)

New Road was reopened to traffic in June 2007 and is now a place that people want to spend time in. Activity has increased, bringing social, economic and – as people see walking and cycling as a better option to vehicles - environmental benefits.

Initial monitoring shows that the scheme has been extremely successful in meeting its objectives. In 2005 it was not worth monitoring the number of staying activities (people stopping to talk etc) in the street – there simply weren’t any people to count.

A survey of activity throughout a normal summer weekday in August recorded nearly 500 staying activities taking place, suggesting that New Road is now the 4th most popular space to spend time in the city, just behind the beach: this is especially true during the evenings.

The same survey recorded that pedestrian activity had risen by an average of 162%. The project’s success in changing the behaviour of the different transport modes using the street is reflected a recent Safety Audit which states:

“During the site inspections we observed that the nature and use of the street has changed completely. New Road, at the time of the Stage 1 Audit site inspection, had a low but constant flow of traffic, with a few pedestrians using the footways”.

At the time of the Stage 3 Audit pedestrians had claimed the street, with vehicles only using it for access and deliveries. The street now had a distinct character with the ambience of a pedestrianised zone; motorists appear to

behave as though they are intruders in the street; give almost total priority to pedestrians and most drive at the lowest possible speeds.”

Best Practise

The design process is now used as a best practise example by English Partnerships and the shared-use approach has led to New Road being recognised as a world class exemplar by cycling groups in how the needs of pedestrians and cyclists can be accommodated.

The Project Team & Design Approach

BHCC established a synergetic project team spanning cross-council departments, Copenhagen-based Gehl Architects, consulting engineers Martin Stockley Associates and designers Landscape Projects.

External stakeholders such as English Heritage and Department for Transport contributed efforts to help realise key elements of the scheme (such as altering the Pavilion Gardens and minimalisation of signs and associated street clutter).

The design process drew on detailed analysis of pedestrian movements, using innovative mapping techniques which identify where individuals rest, move and gather at different times of the day.

The project was developed with public and stakeholders through several workshop meetings, on-street exhibitions and direct communications as the process moved from vision and aspiration to detailed design.

Longer Term Planning

Significant investment in materials has been made with a view to minimise deterioration in future years. BHCC has also adapted regular working practices to improve the long-term maintenance of New Road. For example, an agreement has been made that the contractors used for the New Road works, Edburtons, will undertake any reinstatement to ensure repairs are carried out in line with the high quality standards currently in place.

Summary

By drawing on the skills of a project team capable of combining the best in local and international knowledge and experience, the New Road concept has managed to combine the needs of a wide range of different users and interests without compromise.

Since re-opening in June 2007 New Road has proved to be an overwhelming success with businesses, residents and visitors.

In a project review meeting one local business wondered aloud where the additional people using the street had come from. New Road shows that if people are provided with well designed spaces, they will use them, and public life will return to the city.