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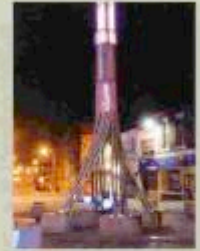
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Clearing away confused thinking on shared spaces

Is blind dogma holding back progress on the development of the 'shared space' concept, asks Tim Pharoah

Proposed shared space square at Woodbrook neighbourhood, Lisburn, Northern Ireland



"Good street design ideally should evolve through research and experimentation and not develop as a reaction to over-enthusiastic promoters or over-cautious regulators," says independent transport planning consultant Tim Pharoah. "But there is a tendency for people newly converted to the principle of 'shared space' design to start calling for shared spaces, rather than for a solution to a problem. There is thus a danger that shared spaces will enter the frothy world of vanity projects and photo-opportunities for local worthies." Pharoah suggests, therefore, that a far better and more widespread understanding of the issues associated with shared space design is needed. "The term 'shared space' was coined by consultant Ben Hamilton-Baillie to describe reliance on individual responsibility rather than regulation," he points out. In Drachten, in the Netherlands, for example, almost all traffic signals have been removed and junctions converted to open plan designs with no marked priorities. "Traffic signs, signals and markings that tell people how to behave are absent, so everyone reacts and responds to other users," Pharoah says. "It works because people do not want to bump into each other, and take care not to."

So how does this differ from the more familiar 'shared surface' residential areas we call Home Zones, of which there are literally thousands in

northern continental Europe? Shared space is a term for schemes on busy streets and intersections, rather than low traffic streets, and is more about traffic behaviour than allocation of street space, Pharoah explains. "The distinction may not be clear-cut, however, and there is more at stake than just semantics," he warns.

Manual for Streets (which Pharoah co-authored), which tackles the issue too briefly, in



Tim Pharoah thinks there is a danger of 'shared space' schemes too often becoming vanity projects

his opinion, says that shared surfaces are "likely to work well... where the volume of motor traffic is below 100 vehicles per hour (peak)". On the following page, under shared space, it then explains that, above 100vph, "pedestrians treat the general path taken by motor vehicles as a 'road' to be crossed rather than as a space to occupy". "This has led some people to argue that 100vph is the limit for sharing, whereas actually it is just a rough threshold above which sharing behaviour is different," Pharoah says. "Obviously people cannot stop to chat in the path of 500 vehicles an hour but they can negotiate their way across if drivers do the same."

"The late Hans Monderman (who introduced scores of shared space schemes) told me that, in his view, there was no upper limit to vehicle volumes and there are already junctions operating successfully with over 2,000 vehicles an hour in Drachten and Chambéry (France)," Pharoah goes on. "The Ashford scheme in the UK, meanwhile, has peak flows in excess of 500 vehicles an hour. Unfortunately, *MfS* is now being used by some highway authorities to resist shared space schemes, despite the fact that there are tens, if not hundreds of examples with flows well in excess of 100vph."

Playing safe?

Most resistance to shared space in the UK arises from safety concerns, yet Pharoah points out that casualty reduction was actually the prime motivation of the innovators of shared space. With more than 100 schemes in Friesland (in the Netherlands), he notes, no serious casualties have been reported in the 20 years since the initiative began. Similarly, during 25 years as chief engineer for Chambéry, Michel Deronzier has converted many of the city's streets to pedestrian priority designs, similar to Dutch-style 'shared spaces', and yet between 1979 and 2006 the number of road casualties reduced by 71%, compared with 41% in other, similar-sized French towns. Pedestrian casualties reduced by 85%. "Given these results, how is it still possible for people to resist on 'safety' grounds?" Pharoah asks rhetorically. "The answer lies in a reluctance to acknowledge the value of danger by design: because the road appears less safe, or at least unclear, people slow down and take more care. This approach is not readily compatible with conventional safety auditing but that does not mean it is wrong."

There is a widespread belief that shared space is expensive, no doubt prompted by high cost Home Zone experiments, and Britain's first major scheme in Ashford, which cost £16m. "But the early shared space schemes in Friesland and

Chambery were experiments in cutting casualties at low cost," Pharoah says. "Posh design may help popularity, but it is not essential for functionality."

Access for all?

He acknowledges that the issue of disabled access in shared space schemes is sometimes "tricky" – shared space and pedestrian priority schemes generally avoid vertical changes in level and in theory everyone benefits from this apart, obviously, from people who use changes of level to navigate: blind and partially sighted people and the dogs that assist them. "Sharing by negotiation is obviously more difficult if you cannot see those you are negotiating with," Pharoah concedes. "To meet the wishes of this group many schemes have incorporated elements that potentially undermine the functionality of shared space and Hans Monderman acknowledged these difficulties and negotiated design modifications with disability groups, but how far is it reasonable to design for a tiny minority in a way that makes life more difficult for the majority (the proportion of the UK population registered as blind or partially sighted is 0.6%)?" In any case, he also asks, why should drivers be any more likely to knock down people who clearly (because of a white cane or guide dog) are blind than they are anyone else? "Surely they are inclined to take even greater care?" Pharoah goes on. "There should be no problem provided that speeds are low and one simple rule is followed: "Walk, don't run."

In looking to foreign examples for inspiration, he suggests, important differences must be considered, such as the high proportion of cycles in Holland, the tendency to observe traffic rules in Germanic countries, and the widespread provision of bypasses to keep through traffic out of town centres. The most crucial difference, however, Pharoah believes, is the 'priority to the nearside' rule, which is the ubiquitous default priority throughout Europe, except the UK. "Our



Shared space crossroads at Ashford ring road

continental neighbours are attuned to watching out for and giving way to traffic entering from the right," he explains. "In the UK we assume we have priority if we are going straight ahead. Thus, descriptions of continental shared space as having "no priority" are incorrect. There may be no priority signs or markings but it is not true to say that there is no priority."

Shared space is being advocated by many as a way of enhancing street environments and providing for non-traffic activities but Pharoah warns that this carries the danger of confusing shared space on busy streets (where people treat the vehicle path as something to be crossed) with shared surface Home Zone-type streets (where children can play and people can linger to chat). "Shared space streets may be free of clutter and signs – hence the term 'naked streets' – but they

can also appear bleak and uninteresting (see the picture of Drachten below)," he says. "It is important to bear in mind that the origin of shared space was to secure lower casualty rates at low cost. The ornamentation and bold design came later. From an urban design perspective, many of the prototype shared space schemes would not now pass muster. A further point is that shared space is currently limited to single streets or junctions. It is not known how effective the concept would be if replicated as a standard street design solution."

Principles in practice

Most shared space schemes are on previously developed streets and junctions but Pharoah has recently been working with the Carvill Group of Northern Ireland to create a new neighbourhood centre at the heart of an urban extension of about 4,000 people. "An early decision to focus all local movement on a public square, followed by study visits to best practice sites in Holland, France and Germany, led us to promote a shared space design," he explains. "The aim was a high degree of pedestrian freedom and driver speeds below 20mph. The main elements are (a) no long forward views; (b) a strong sense of enclosure with buildings taller than the streets are wide; (c) four streets meeting, but not in a crossroad formation; (d) balanced pedestrian and vehicle activity across and through the square; and (e) radically different surface materials and landscape from the surrounding streets. If the proposal gains approval from the roads authority, it will probably be the largest and boldest shared space in a new development. Wish us luck!" ■



Shared space crossroads carrying over 20,000 vehicles per day at Drachten in the Netherlands – note quasi-zebra crossing with tactile approach