

SPACE IN ACTION

Charting the evolution of creative public spaces

Queen Square, Bristol

THE CLOSURE OF A DUAL CARRIAGEWAY MARKED THE START OF A PROCESS TO RECLAIM AND REINVIGORATE AN HISTORIC SQUARE IN THE HEART OF BRISTOL.

CHRISTOPHER HEATH OF BRISTOL CITY COUNCIL DESCRIBES THE TRANSFORMATION

IT HAS TAKEN over ten years, but the transformation of Queen Square in the centre of Bristol illustrates how an urban space can be reclaimed for residents and workers alike.

The square, which is located in the historic heart of Bristol about half a kilometre south of the city's main shopping area, is one of the largest residential Georgian squares in Europe and was probably the first landscaped square to be completed in England (circa 1699) outside of London. It combined the then fashionable idea of shaded tree-lined walks and gravel paths set within grass, with a sculpture of King William III on horseback by Rysbrack (erected 1736, listed Grade I) at its centre.

But in 1936, despite strong public protest, the architectural unity of the square was destroyed by the construction of a dual carriageway ('Redcliffe Way'), which bisected the square diagonally, as part of an inner relief road. By 1990, 20,000 vehicles crossed the square each day bringing with them the associated problems of noise and pollution. The square had a generally unkempt and run down appearance; little public seating remained intact, and it was little used.

The square's green space was largely inaccessible to the public due to intense



All images: Bristol City Council

Above right: The square has become a much-used area in which to relax during the day

Below: Office workers have found a new use for the gravel paths, playing boule in their lunch hour



perimeter car parking and the physical obstruction of the road. Over the years, original fine forecourt boundary walls and railings had been removed and building occupiers parked vehicles on the open forecourts. This was aesthetically intrusive and a danger to public safety – pedestrians often had to walk in the road, since parked vehicles overhung the very narrow pavements.

The pavement surfaces were broken (from over running by vehicles), uneven, and covered in a discordant range of materials. Signage had been added over the years in an unplanned manner. The resulting clutter was extensive, confusing to interpret, and intrusive within the street scene. The surrounding trees were over-grown and views of the perimeter, listed buildings from within the square were obscured by dense foliage.

Approximately one third of the surrounding office buildings were vacant and property owners and residents were concerned at the wider economic effects the poor aesthetic condition of the square appeared to be contributing to. Clearly, the square's

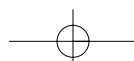
potential to become a major positive public space at the heart of Bristol was not being realised.

The first step forward

In 1990 the council's draft local plan identified the aspiration to close the road as a first stage in enhancing the square. Redcliffe Way was finally closed to traffic in 1993, after an 18-month experimental closure and a series of public consultations. Unfortunately, it meant that 1,200 buses were diverted around the edges of the square each day.

After closure, however, work ceased on further enhancements due to budget cuts, and little was achieved for five years. It was only with the advent of the Heritage Lottery Fund's (HLF) Urban Parks programme that the city council recognised an opportunity to achieve substantial partnership funding for the square's comprehensive enhancement.

Extensive historic research into the development of the square was jointly funded by Bristol City Council and English Heritage (EH). After which, the council, supported by EH and the Queen Square Association (a local





business association created as a registered charity to assist raising money for the project), won a successful bid in December 1998 for £3.67m towards the square's phased enhancement.

Further funding came from: money raised by the Queen Square Association and Bristol City Council – including over £100,000 in contributions from an associated section 106 planning agreement on a development site beside the square.

The key elements

The council design team felt from the beginning that it would be unrealistic to try returning the square to any one particular period in history, since its layout had undergone a number of redesigns during its existence. It was important, however, to reintegrate elements that had been consistent features throughout the life of the square, as well as accommodating contemporary uses. So the resultant scheme was largely based on a plan of the city dating from 1817.

The first phase of the project, which was completed in 2000, included:

improvements to the central green area; the addition of missing corner trees; the creation of Breendon gravel pathways; the conservation and repositioning of the King William III statue; the addition of an oak post-and-rail wooden boundary fence; and the reduction and reorganisation of parking.

The second, council-funded, phase saw the removal of the buses from the square's perimeter after adjustments to a nearby road junction. While the third phase, completed in 2003, involved the: widening of footpaths and their resurfacing in natural flag stone; resurfacing the perimeter road in the original stone setts; and re-instating the traditionally detailed boundary walls, railings and gates to the forecourts of the listed properties surrounding the square.

The changes to the forecourts were the subject of challenging negotiations with the landlords (sometimes remote financial institutions). In return they received alternative parking spaces and the substantial enhancement of their buildings through the overall aesthetic improvements to the area.

Other phase three improvements included: the removal of unnecessary and duplicative signage with a scaling down of its size; the thinning and pruning of surrounding plane trees to open up views into and out of the square; the removal of level changes and the widening of pavements to make the square fully accessible for those with disabilities; and the improvement of seating and lighting.

The final phase of the project is still underway but is expected to finish at the end of 2005. It will involve

the closure of a roundabout at the northwestern entrance to the square in order to create a new public space linking it with the city centre. There are plans for a landscaped entrance space to the square and the possibility of a new café fronting onto the space, although specific elements are still subject to community consultation.

The outcome

The impact of the work on the square is clear. It is often full of people on a sunny lunchtime or after work, and the reintroduction of gravel paths has led to office workers spontaneously playing boule at lunchtime.

From an area that was rarely used and just passed through quickly on the way to somewhere else, it has now become a major destination in its own right.

There is now a low level of building vacancy and several office properties have been returned back into sole residential use. The square is now

Top left: Redcliffe Way running through Queen Square in 1993

Left: Prior to the restoration of the square's perimeter, the combination of forecourt parking and narrow pavements forced pedestrians into the roads

FACTS AND FIGURES

Location:	Queen Square, Bristol
Size:	1.8ha
Total cost of project:	approx £5.4m
of which:	Heritage Lottery Fund Urban Parks Programme grant – £3.67m
	Bristol City Council – £1.43m
	Section 106 developer contribution – £100,000
	Queen Square Association – £50,000
Project leaders:	City Centre Projects and Urban Design Team, Department of Transport, Environment and Leisure
Consultants:	Quantity surveyors: Davis, Langdon and Everest
	Architects (forecourt re-construction): Niall Phillips Architects
	Historical researchers: Pat Hughes, Jane Root, and Christopher Heath
	Landscape architect: Bristol City Council – Landscape design team
Contractors:	Central square and perimeter roads and pavements: C J Pearce and Co
	Building and civil engineering contractors: E.R. Hemmings (Building)
	Investigations to determine evidence of path layout and detailing: Bristol Region and Archaeological Services
	Conservation of Rysbrack Grade I listed statue of King William III: Nimbus Conservation
Maintenance:	Continental Landscapes



Above: Persuading landlords to remove cars from their building forecourts was a challenge but they have since benefited from an enhanced setting for their buildings

Right: One of the artist-designed bird boxes in the square

Below: The regeneration of the square was largely based on a plan of the city dating from 1817, in which shaded tree-lined walks and gravel paths set within grass meet at the sculpture

seen as a very desirable place to live and further applications for residential conversion are forthcoming.

The amount of traffic using the perimeter road has decreased, and the re-introduction of a traditional setted road surface has reduced traffic speeds. Pedestrians have also benefited from an especially widened shared pavement/cycle-way which has been formed on the south side of the square, and now forms part of a pedestrian and cycle route – ‘Brunel Mile’. This places Queen Square on a strategic pedestrian route linking Bristol Temple Meads station, to the city centre and the Bristol Harbourside development area. Pedestrian surveys show that over 1.6m people pass through the square each year.

An events strategy

Along with physical regeneration of the square, the council has also instigated an events programme including small informal lunchtime events, open-air cinema and jazz concerts, and major rock and pop concerts (20,000 people attended a Massive Attack concert last summer). These have brought the

square's regeneration to a wide audience and have helped establish its association with the Bristol arts and music scene.

Other events include: organised boule tournaments; a business exhibition in temporary structures (overcoming the lack of a dedicated exhibition space in Bristol); and the launch of 25 hot air balloons as part of the International Bristol Balloon Fiesta.

An arts project – High Life – has also led to the installation of artist-designed bird boxes in the square's trees.

Surveys have been conducted to ascertain the impact of the square's transformation, including a survey of local companies by the Bristol Cultural Development in 2002. It found an overwhelmingly positive response.

But, among the elements attracting concern in the survey were crime levels, litter and insufficient seating. Since then, city centre wardens now patrol the square and the council is considering how the space can be managed at night. Though the square is well-lit, with its combination of lamp standards and flood-lighting, when events are not taking place it can seem rather quiet after dark.

It is hoped that the redesign of the northwest entrance to the square, including removal of the existing Prince Street roundabout under the final phase IV of the project, will help to open up views in and out of the square. The enhanced visual connection between the square and city centre will assist in legibility of walking and cycling routes, whilst increasing a sense of security at night.

The council has also offered the now vacant Custom House for lease as a restaurant or bar. This would be a

positive step towards animating the space in the evening and perhaps encourage further mixed use, although currently no developer has come forward with a firm proposal.

A ten-year management plan has been produced detailing objectives and maintenance plans. It provides a framework for identifying further business opportunities and improvements, such as the installation of more benches, and new noticeboards.

While still ongoing, the project shows what can be achieved starting with the premise that traffic need not dominate a public space; a point recognised with two national awards – the Royal Town Planning Institute Planning award for the Built Heritage, 2003 and the National Civic Trust Award, 2004. The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, has also recognised the project's worth, featuring it as an exemplar scheme on its website's best practice library. ■

Visit: www.bristol-city.gov.uk and www.cabe.org.uk



Christopher Heath is currently projects coordinator within Bristol City Council's city centre projects and urban design team, in which he

has worked for 14 years. The team works on a wide range of planning, conservation and regeneration projects including provision of design and master planning and archaeological advice to the council's development control teams.

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