

MADE

Shrewsbury public realm

location: Shropshire

It was recognised by a number of public organisations that the historic centre of Shrewsbury was under threat as a result of increasing traffic, with its attendant problems of air pollution, noise and accidents. The range of public realm works that have been implemented in the town centre were undertaken to address these issues.

Shrewsbury was one of four historic towns participating in the Historic Core Zone Pilot Project promoted by the English Historic Towns Forum with support from the Department for Transport, English Heritage and the Civic Trust. This experimental scheme was promoted by Shropshire County Council. Its purpose was to reduce street clutter in a historic town centre and improve the environment for pedestrians.

Introduction

Shrewsbury city centre presented several challenges in terms of its urban design. Its streets, laid out on a medieval street pattern, are tightly enclosed within a nearly circular bend of the River Severn. Traffic can enter at only three points, with congestion and conflict between pedestrians and vehicles being an undesirable outcome. In terms of environment, parts of the centre are prone to flooding, though the town has a large area of parkland, as well as a long distance footpath running along the river.



Rob Surl, Head of Transportation, was instrumental in trying to adopt a more sensitive approach to urban design, seeking to tackle some of the visual problems caused in historic towns by the clutter of modern road signage and inappropriate paving materials. Shropshire County Council adopted a multi-disciplinary approach, bringing together transport planners, highway and traffic engineers, planning and conservation officers and urban designers to work on various projects.

As well as addressing the pedestrian and vehicle issues, the towns heritage has to be balanced against the demands of a busy regional shopping centre. A high number of Shrewsbury's 660 listed buildings fall within this small area

Design process

The High Street Route plan was a major element of an Integrated Transport Plan produced in 1994 that sought to improve the management of traffic in the town and enhance the physical environment. The county council worked with various streetscape designers such as Halcrow, Nick De Jong Associates and Colin Davis Associates who have specialised in developing approaches more sympathetic to the needs of historic towns.

The council's budgeting strategy was instrumental in ensuring resources were made available for pedestrians and cyclists. The Local Transport Plan budget used a matrix approach to distribute available capital funding between different types of road user, and between the county town, the smaller market towns and the rural area. This resulted in a range of streetscape and transport schemes being implemented in Shrewsbury and other towns across Shropshire.

Shrewsbury High Street was improved in two phases in 1996 and 1997. Instead of banning cars from the congested High Street, the Council decided to implement a design scheme that would make it more user friendly to pedestrians and cyclists.

One of the main aims was to encourage drivers to slow down and give way to pedestrians. If driving speed was reduced to around 15mph, then there would be time for eye contact to be established between drivers and other road users.

The main way this was carried out was through a narrowing of the carriageway to a minimum width of 3.5m with the footways being widened accordingly. Closely spaced informal 'courtesy crossings' were also introduced. The distinctive design and close spacing of these informal crossings (at an average of 30 metres) encourages drivers to maintain low speeds and give way to pedestrians while also unifying aesthetically with the overall character of the street.

The whole route has been made a Restricted Parking Zone, and visually the street has been improved by making it free of yellow lines. The new road design also cut out the need for bollards, beleisha beacons and other intrusive signs. On-street waiting is restricted to blue badge parking bays. The loading bays may be used for waiting after 6.30pm and all day on Sundays.

A series of 20 'courtesy crossings' were constructed along the High Street. These were defined as crossing places by using smooth-faced York stone setts.

Parking and loading bays were indicated by black basalt setts, a material found elsewhere in the town.

The Department for Transport sanctioned a reduced size of loading restriction signs which are fixed to robust timber bollards at the edge of the pavement. The posts also helped define the crossing points.

The carriageway and bus bays were surfaced with basalt (Whinstone) setts. The channels were formed in the same material, but with longer blocks.

Loading bays and blue badge holder bays were surfaced with York stone setts, providing a contrast in colour and texture with the carriageway surface. Darker coloured setts were used to delineate bays.

Footways were surfaced with fine sawn York stone flags. The same flags with the studs machined from the stone were used as tactile surfaces at the edges of pedestrian crossings.

Evaluation

Speeds are seldom above 15 mph, giving ample time for eye contact between drivers and pedestrians. The reduced size of loading restriction signs which are fixed to robust timber bollards at the edge of the pavement also help to define the series of “courtesy crossings” along the High Street and encourage drivers to give way to pedestrians. No formal crossings are used so the surfaces, road markings and street furniture associated with them are not needed.

As an alternative to traffic regulation orders, physical methods can be effective in reducing the clutter of signs, lines and signals as well as promoting safety.

However, care is needed to combine engineering and design solutions that relate to the precise conditions of the location. As there are no controlled crossings, such as zebra or pelican crossings, there is no need for associated road markings or posts. This results in a less cluttered streetscape.

The scheme has resulted in a 34 per cent reduction in traffic volume, a 22 per cent reduction in traffic speed and a high level of public approval. The crossings relate to pedestrian desire lines and to the precise architectural features of historic buildings along the street and so improve the association between architecture and public realm. Delivery bays and bus stops are carefully designed in a limited range of materials and construction details. Heavy traffic has proved too much for the granite setts forming the carriageway. The bitumen grout did not adhere fully, and the cement mortar bed was washed out. In 2000, the whole carriageway was reconstructed. The original setts were cut in half, and re-laid in a high strength grout over a full depth asphalt road base. Yorkshire coursing on the edge of the pavements was not tough enough for the demands put on it. These were replaced by granite.

Key design features to look out for

- Informal ‘courtesy’ crossing points are neatly aligned with entrances to major buildings along the street, helping to reinforce the link between buildings and streets. Their spacing also encourages low vehicular speeds and pedestrian priority.

- Improved kerb arrangements offer less opportunity for stumbling.
- Subtle changes in materials and textures to demarcate different pedestrian and vehicular elements in the street such as loading bays and crossings rather than obtrusive or garish street clutter.
- Narrowing of the vehicular carriageways, slowing the traffic speeds to encourage eye to eye contact between drivers and pedestrians.
- Overall reduction in street clutter and unnecessary signage, freeing the character of the streetscape to be more defined by the buildings, the public realm and the activities taking place in the street.

Link and downloads

RUDI case study

<http://www.rudi.net/books/18775>

English Heritage case study

<http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/upload/pdf/West-Midlands-Streets-Part3.pdf>

Shrewsbury and Atcham Borough Council

<http://www.shrewsbury.gov.uk/public/home/default.asp>

Colin Davies & Associates website

<http://streetdesign.info/>

Contact for further information

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