

## *Comments on Report on Widemarsh Street Trip Incidents*

The controversy over the tripping and falling in Widemarsh Street arose entirely in connection with the design of the street and pavement. The council has asserted that falls due to the nature of street design are rare and that they (the council) would only be liable in the case of poor maintenance or of inadequate construction. A court would have to decide whether this is really so.

The title of the report is "Kerb Design Review". Apparently it is not a 'Review of need for kerbs' or an assessment of the desirability of a 'Shared Space' scheme. The report implies, but does not state, that kerbs were part of the initial design. (Design History 1.1.4.), (Note also 1.1.6)

By definition, shared space contains no kerbs or street furniture. Its surface is uniformly flat and without signs..

*See 1 Towards Shared Space by Ben Hamilton-Baillie*

URBAN DESIGN International, Volume 13, Number 2, Palgrave Macmillan 2008, page 131, page 133.

2 *Wikipedia* "Shared Space is an urban design . Shared space removes --- kerbs ---."

3 *Wikipedia: Ben Hamilton-Baillie* cited as a well known proponent of Shared space in which the distinction between road and pavement is removed.

Nowhere in this report is it stated that Widemarsh Street is intended to be such a shared space.

It is noted that after repeated discussion of the merits of the design, a "Stage 4 Road Safety Audit" will be undertaken 12 months after completion of the road works. (1.2.4)

The general tenor of this report may be summarised as follows:

An attempt to show that

the tripping and falling incidents have little statistical significance;

may not be connected with the design of the street improvements;

the inclusion of kerbs in street design is widely approved;

'shared space' schemes are widely disapproved;

and may disadvantage the disabled, especially through absence of kerbs;

the tripping and falling are largely the fault of the pedestrians;

it is reasonable for the Council to take no action at present.

Comments:

58 reported incidents are compared with an estimated 870,661 pedestrians using Widemarsh Street during a "comparable" period. ***This comparison is not of value***, as the

conditions applying during the two periods cited cannot be shown to be comparable. (e.g. presence/absence of traffic and known pedestrianisation; very different surface colours and patterns; different consistency of presence of kerbs, varying kerb heights, different degrees of 'slipperiness' of surface; unknown proportions of disabled or aged in the samples chosen etc.) Statistical significance is irrelevant in the context of a council knowingly constructing a hazard in a public place.

The people who fell tripped over the kerbs. The trips must directly be a consequence of the presence of kerbs i.e. of the present design. There may be other contributing factors, but the truth of this statement still stands. Whether kerbs were present in Widemarsh Street before the improvement began has no relevance.

Shared Space schemes have been tried in Britain and in other European countries and have many supporters, which include a prominent member of the Widemarsh design team. (See above).

The report does not explain why the areas without kerbs in the new Widemarsh scheme are not detrimental to the disabled.

A list is given of habits and practices by pedestrians possibly contributing to the falls. These practices are no more than one would expect from the public in pursuit of its normal business. (sic. "looking in shop windows")

58 people have fallen as a consequence of the alterations to Widemarsh Street and three have suffered significant injury even before the work was half completed. It would have been reasonable to eliminate the major cause of the problem at that stage. It is noted that the Council has taken a different view, preferring to carry on as planned, but to review the situation twelve months after completion.

#### **Further detailed comments:**

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Paragraph 1.1.3. The innovative HBA design: It is noteworthy that in his report of April 2009 to Herefordshire Council, titled "Hereford Streetscape Strategy", Mr Hamilton-Baillie never mentions either shared space or shared surfaces. This may imply that these were not part of his initial brief.

#### **1.1.4**

This states that Amey objected to 25mm kerbs "as unsuitable and could cause a trip issue". It also states that Amey later recommended a kerb 3 to 4 times higher (75-100mm). There may be good logic in Amey's recommendation, but it is not obvious.

#### **1.1.5**

The expression "loss of the key aid of navigation" is used without defining navigation or how the kerbs aid this. A very notable omission is that of reports by the disabled or blind of incidents arising from the absence of kerbs in Hightown and in Eigngate. The reader is left here with no clear idea of the nature or value of the 'navigation'.

#### **1.5.3 & 1.5.6 Consultation:**

Only comments received in writing are likely to have been recorded. However, the need for kerbs in the design was queried verbally at the Saxty's exhibition by at least two members of the Civic Society.

## **Section 2 TRIP issue:**

Several pie-charts in bright colours with percentages are displayed, but no actual numbers are given for these coloured pie segments. No statistical significance can be attached to these segments without these numbers. We note that possible "reasons for tripping" included the colour scheme of the road improvements and misjudgement on the part of the subjects. However, the most important reason for tripping - the presence of kerbs - was omitted.

Comparing visitors to the city with locals is a most unsafe exercise, particularly as no information on matching for age or fitness is presented.

The usefulness of the gender pie chart is questionable, and its inclusion of an 'Unknown' category is intriguing.

The marked reduction in the number of trip incidents following the deployment of black tape along the kerb edges is very welcome and may support the idea that insufficient contrast was a factor in tripping. However, the last paragraph on page 15 of the report states that "*Lack of colour differentiation is therefore unlikely to be a factor.*" In tripping. Reconciling the effects of the black tape with this statement is impossible.

2.8.3. The Council's resolve to observe consistency in design of street works is to be commended. It is unfortunate that the specifications to which it plans to be consistent are different from those obtaining in most of Hereford's city centre. It would be more consistent and less confusing for the public to stick to the design features and principles used in Hightown and Eigngate. We note also that the Auditors had recommended continuation of the shared surface arrangement, presently applying in Hightown, into Widemarsh Street on the grounds of consistency and of safety. . See Appendix 3.1.3. of the report)

We note attempts to justify this inconsistency on the grounds of 'Guidance' and of standard practice. The absence of guidance or of standard practice is admitted later in this report page 17 paragraph 5.

## **Section 4 Design Team Comments**

**4.1.9 The Hereford City Centre Streetscape Strategy** describes a barrier free public realm more in keeping with High Street and Eigngate than with the Widemarsh design. It is difficult to see how this strategy could include these contrasting areas and yet claim consistency.

### **Section 4.2. Precedents**

No exception can be taken to the precedents quoted. However, somewhere in this report, the reader ought to be given access to examples of shared space schemes without kerbs for comparison. References ought also to be given to the post-construction data darkly mentioned in connection with the shared space schemes in Holland and Belgium so that the reader might form his own view. (See Appendix 3.1.3 of the report)

### **Section 5.1 Site Team Comments**

Freedom to make comments of this nature is the right of everyone. Attempts to shift the blame for

the tripping incidents on to the public are regrettable, especially as that public appears to be showing completely normal behaviour observable in any pedestrianised city centre. 'Looking in shop windows' is to be expected from shoppers. Moreover, that is just what our traders want. These comments would have been better omitted from this report and not used to justify the council's position.

## **5.2 Architectural Site Visit comments.**

The commendation of the standard of work is indeed justified. The materials used appear to be of good quality. The design is excellent in terms of overall concept and colour scheme, even if the inclusion of kerbs spoils it to some degree.

The last paragraph of these comments gives the clearest indication so far that extensive sharing of the space with traffic is planned, even if it is not strictly a shared space according to the definition above. This leaves the pedestrian with a considerable problem, in that Widemarsh Street will not have the safety and convenience of a fully pedestrianised area, yet will appear to be such. Its proximity to the fully pedestrianised Hightown can only add to his/her confusion.

## **Section 6 Conclusion and Recommendations.**

6.1.1. The high incidence of falls in the improved area of Widemarsh Street certainly remains a matter of concern. To state that every aspect of the project has been considered, when the cause of the falls - the presence of kerbs - has been excluded, is perverse, especially so in view of the auditors recommendation.

The decision to continue monitoring the trip situation is welcome and expected. However, the four options presented to deal with persistence of the tripping are inconsistent with the principles set out by Mr. Hamilton-Baillie in his Streetscape Strategy for Hereford City Centre and would introduce unnecessary clutter in what would otherwise have been a very acceptable scheme.

The opportunity to take remedial action has been ignored in favour of inaction.

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## **Final HCS comment.**

The value of this report is doubtful. It fails to consider the most obvious cause of the tripping - the presence of kerbs.

The numbers of those who tripped are important but small, too small to allow their use for statistical purposes.

No useful references are given in the text to several sources quoted. The reader is unable to check and evaluate these sources.

Failure to supply records of mishaps befalling the disabled where no kerbs are present e.g. in Hightown, is a serious omission.

In the absence of official guidance, the designers' (and the council's) rejection of the recommendation made by the auditors in connection with kerbs is hard to explain.

The inconsistency between this scheme and the conditions applying in most of Hereford City Centre is bound to be a continuing source of confusion and of possible danger to the public. It is regrettable that our council should knowingly perpetuate this state of affairs.

Attempts to show that the victims were really to blame are reprehensible.

This is all a pity, as the Widemarsh Improvement Scheme overall does credit to our Council and enhances the local streetscape, adding to the architectural merit of our city. How it will perform is difficult to predict, particularly because it is neither full pedestrianisation nor genuine shared space. The next year or two will show how safe it is for people.

H.C.S 22nd October 2010