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Editorial

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Editorial

Nicole Metje Dipl.-Eng, PhD, MCInstCES, MASCE, FHEA
Professor of Infrastructure Monitoring, Head of the Power and
Infrastructure Research Group, Department of Civil Engineering,
School of Engineering, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK
(Orcid:0000-0002-6741-8183)

Robert Huxford BSc, MSc
Director, Urban Design Group, London, UK; Co-Founder,
PRIAN – Public Realm Information and Advice Network, UK
Kenny Aitken BSc, CEng, Eur Ing, MICE, CMIHT
Area Manager, Transport Scotland

‘Someone is going to be killed, you idiots. Either because they walked into the road, not knowing it was road, or because a motorist drove down the pavement not knowing it was a pavement.’ This was the television pundit Jeremy Clarkson’s verdict on the Shared Space scheme in Ashford back in 2008. Two pedestrians were killed shortly after Mr Clarkson’s statement, not within the Shared Space, but in a conventional street within a residential area about half a mile away. This was not an isolated incident. Just short of 8% of pedestrian fatalities occur while the pedestrian is on the footway. And yet much of the debate on street design over the past decade has revolved around the safety and inclusivity of Shared Space, rather than the safety and inclusivity of all types of street and highway features.

In the 1930s there was a national crisis over the thousands of people being killed each year on the streets of Great Britain. The response was to introduce an ever-increasing array of lines, signs, barriers, separation, segregation and regulation. ‘Observe the rules and you will be safe’ was the message and this seemed to be the right thing to do.

But there were two underlying problems to this approach. Firstly, the way in which people adjust their behaviour in response to perceived danger. Around 2000 years ago, Publilius Syrus observed that ‘He is most free from danger, who, even when safe, is on his guard.’ *‘Caret periculo, qui etiam cum est tutus cavet.’* (Sententiae: line 128). He understood then what we now call the principle of Risk Compensation – that if something seems dangerous then people take more care; whereas if it is perceived to be safe, people drop their guard and become careless. One of the objectives of Shared Space is to remove false information that can trap people into danger. But this has led to Shared Spaces being routinely described as ‘an accident waiting to happen’, and conversely there is often public pressure on highway authorities to make streets look safer, irrespective of whether this will actually make them safer.

The second problem is ‘framing’ – having a narrow outlook, rather than being open to the full range of consequences.

In the case of pedestrian guardrails there was a view emanating from the 1930s that there was a proper way to cross the road, and that was at a proper crossing point. If people could not be persuaded to use crossings, then they should be forced to use them by guardrails. This reasoning failed to consider the possibility that official crossings might not actually be safer, owing to people not observing the rules, making mistakes, drivers jumping the lights and people placing too much faith in signals rather than checking whether the traffic had actually stopped. The reasoning did not consider the possibility that guardrails might have other effects, such as allowing drivers to disregard pedestrians and therefore giving them the confidence to drive faster, risking higher impact speeds and an increased chance of severe or fatal injuries, reduced visibility of pedestrians, particularly children, or the possibility of cyclists being trapped against the railings by turning vehicles, or the impact streets blocked by guardrails would have on people’s willingness to walk, and the general quality of the urban environment. Shared Space emerged as a counter to this.

A pattern also emerged of introducing highway innovations in a desire to improve safety, but without any robust studies to confirm whether there had been an improvement. Robust means well-designed, unbiased case-control studies, based on sound data, that allow for statistical effects such as regression to the mean, and which have statistically significant results. Guardrails were one example: despite decades of use, it was only in recent years that research was finally conducted, finding no clear evidence of a safety benefit. A second example are the zig-zag lines required before and after pedestrian crossings (required in the UK, but not in other countries). The idea for these originated in the 1970s, when a report suggested that lives could be saved by preventing overtaking on the approach to pedestrian crossings. A Freedom of Information request to the Department for Transport (DfT) failed to reveal any subsequent research conducted for the DfT on whether zig-zag lines are effective.

The hope with this special edition was that it would be an opportunity for researchers to promote case-control studies comparing Shared Space with other forms of street design.

Figure 1. Shared spaces in Lausanne, Switzerland

There is a legacy of papers and reports that are statements of opinion, are based on poor or selective evidence, science or research, or deal only with one type of street design or type of person.

There is a need for a much better understanding of the impact of **different approaches to street design and management**, including Shared Space. It tends to be forgotten that the carriageway also functions as a shared surface when pedestrians cross the road. The question remains what is ‘best’ and for whom.

The following considerations need to be taken into account

- **all people of all ages and abilities**, children, teenagers, young adults, blind and partially sighted people, deaf people, wheelchair users, stick or rollator users
- **all types of activity** including trading, shopping, playing, exercising, idling, chatting, delivering, collecting
- **all modes of movement**, including walking, cycling, driving, guided bus, rail-based and autonomous
- **all times of day and all weathers**
- **all functions** necessary to maintain normal life, such as waste collection, space for landscape and trees, street lighting and utilities
- **all aspects** including aesthetics, land-take, environmental impact, capital and maintenance costs

Shared spaces can be found in many different contexts and locations, as can be seen in Figure 1 – note the inclusion of the latest mode of movement – scooters.

This edition of *Municipal Engineer* comes a year on from the death of Ben Hamilton-Baillie, the UK’s leading proponent of Shared Space, 18 months on from the DfT request to local authorities to pause Shared Space Schemes, and two years on from the Chartered Institution of Highway and Transportations industry review of Shared Space type environments (CIHT, 2018). There remains the need for robust research into the pressing questions over safe, accessible, sustainable and inclusive street design: not just Shared Space streets, but all types of street.

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