

## THE BROAD STREET PLAN – A STUDY FOR OXFORD BY OXFORD.

*Foreword to the Broad Street Plan by the Right Honourable Christopher Patten CH, Chancellor of the University of Oxford*

*"Oxford is one of the great jewels of Europe with a remarkable richness of architecture and urban life united in its streets and public spaces. Broad Street sits at the very heart of the city and of the collegiate University. This report is the result of extraordinary co-operation involving all of the people and bodies who feel passionately about the centre of this beautiful city and it is heartening to see how the plans for Broad Street have come together following the years of discussion.*

*I am struck by the clear simplicity of the concept and look forward to seeing the translation of the plans into action over the years of my Chancellorship."*

The Plan for Broad Street grew out of the Oxford Transport Strategy, OTS, which was introduced in 1999 and acted to close the street to through traffic. This gave an opportunity to make improvements to the public realm, the space between the buildings, which would not previously have been possible.

The Study first began to come together in 2001, with the OTS well established and a City Council Public Realm Strategy for the City Centre in place, intended to improve the City's streetscape. In spite of this, improvements to Broad Street had been slow to materialise, and there was a growing swell of concern for its poor state. It retained a somewhat uncared for feel with increasing street clutter. Added to this, in 2002, the City and County Councils had chosen to focus attention on Cornmarket Street.



*Distracting street clutter  
Photograph: Kim Wilkie  
Associates*

Various ideas had begun to come forward from individuals and groups within the City, and the Friends of the Broad had formed under the

leadership of Jeanne Bliss. There were some interesting and innovative ideas put forward, but it was difficult to see how any one of these plans could happen. What was needed was a coherent and considered approach.

Oxford Preservation Trust has as one of its main charitable aims the improvement and enhancement of Oxford's environment. It has a history of bringing people together and making things happen, such as the restoration of Magdalen Bridge in the 1980s with the County Council, more recently the ongoing restoration of the Martyrs' Memorial acting with the City Council, and, of course, the up and coming Castle.

The Trustees took the decision that the plight of Broad Street was something to which they could begin to make a difference, and the idea of commissioning a Plan for Broad Street was born. From the outset the Trust recognised that this was not just a local issue, but one with a place on the national and international stage. It further recognised that if any Study was going to have any chance of success then it must be a Study for Oxford, owned by a wide variety of groups within the City, and not simply the voice of the Trust.

And so the Broad Street Steering Group was formed. This was drawn from relevant national and south east regional agencies, English Heritage and the Commission for the Built Environment, CABE, together with Oxfordshire County Council as Highways Authority, Oxford City Council as Planning Authority, The University of Oxford and the Broad Street Colleges, the Oxford Civic Society and representation from the Business Community. Funding was secured from Oxford Preservation Trust, the two Councils, and the University and Colleges in equal measure, with contributions from Oxford Civic Society and private individuals. Latterly the South East England Development Agency, SEEDA, became involved, providing funding for the publication of the report and explanatory leaflet.

The Steering Group was wholeheartedly behind the appointment of the respected landscape and urban designer Kim Wilkie. His previous work had included the greening and improving of Hyde Park Corner for English Heritage, which had useful parallels in its partnership approach, working with a wide variety of national and London based agencies.

It has been clear throughout the Study that the decision to appoint Kim Wilkie and his colleagues was the right one. Kim has proved to be a personable and committed professional. He had begun his knowledge and love of the City during his time as a history student at New College in the 1970s and his understanding of and commitment to the place shone through as the work unfolded.



To plan for the future of The Broad, its history and past development must be understood. Garden historians Mavis Batey and David Lambert assisted with this work, which was written up in the Trust Newsletter of March 2003.

As Kim writes in his report:

“Broad Street is one of the great urban spaces of Europe. The rich variety of the architecture; the lives that have been lived and lost in the place; and the dynamic role of the street in the centre of Oxford, combine to give the Broad a powerful beauty and significance.

The street began life as a disreputable ditch outside the city walls. Gradually, as the University emerged from the back alleys; as the walls came down; and as the fine Wren and Hawksmoor buildings grew up, Broad Street became an elegant thoroughfare and meeting place.”

*“Hawksmoor proposed a master plan for the area around the Radcliffe, Sheldonian, Clarendon, Bodleian and Museum of Science. This, in fact, was never built to any master plan but assembled piece by piece” Julian Munby, Oxford Archaeology (2003).*

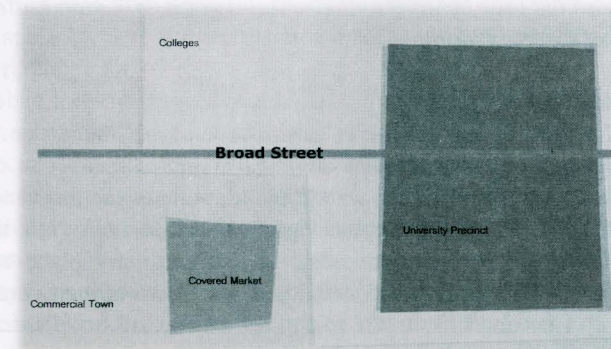
Today, the street means different things to different groups and individuals: as a bicycle or pedestrian route to work; for access to the facilities in the city centre, the all important Covered Market or to Blackwells; use of the shops at the western end, or to reach the colleges which line the street whether as student, fellow or visitor; all these activities need to be understood and taken into account. In addition, the street is home to the University’s famous Bodleian Library, a place for University ceremonial occasions, but also a tourist attraction and a meeting place in itself.

Kim spent time understanding how The Broad developed into the street it is today, its character, its life and the movement within it, and doing the same for the surrounding streets.

“A long history of memories and traditions has made The Broad into something of a chameleon. At its eastern end, the street is the climax of the University precinct from St. Mary’s up through Radcliffe Square and the Divinity Schools to the Clarendon and Sheldonian. It is the ceremonial heart of the University and the focus of visitor interest in the city. By contrast, the western end of the street is still part of the commercial town, with a long established row of specialist shops linking to the Covered Market, George Street and Cornmarket. In the middle of The Broad the Colleges are dominant. Trinity and Balliol connect down Turl Street with Exeter, Jesus and Lincoln. Each of these identities combines to create Broad Street, and

its colourful personality is dependent on the dance between them.

The character and role of The Broad also changes as it connects to the adjoining lanes and streets. Each street needs to be considered in the context of its neighbour.”



*The overlapping lives and identities of The Broad*  
Image: Kim Wilkie Associates

The Broad also plays an important role in the wider city, with the width of the street giving it its rather grand, discrete appearance, and yet it forms an integral part of the street and traffic system of Oxford. Before the Oxford Transport Strategy it had been used by cars as an alternative rat-run to The High, and since then various interim schemes had been introduced aimed at improving the street for the non-car user. But what had resulted was a rather temporary and unresolved state.

“As a rat-run full of traffic the street was a nightmare, but without any cars or people The Broad became lifeless.”

The level of consultation that took place from the earliest stage was huge. A list of all the parties that the Steering Group could think of was drawn up and Kim and his team were given the job of making these contacts, a task which they performed admirably and with a listening ear, often at one-to-one meetings.

What was delightful about the Study and this early consultation, was the positive approach that everyone took. The clear message coming through was that something needed to happen and that working together in partnership was the way to achieve it. This culminated in a good tempered meeting at Exeter College in Summer 2003 with a wide ranging audience from all walks of the City.



*"Oxford is a working city and we must consider business, but this is an exciting opportunity and we should not miss it by being too prejudiced by personal concerns. We should keep an open mind, not be obsessed with past problems but look forward and give this a good go." Alan Lester, Past Chairman of Covered Market (2003).*

Kim Wilkie writes:

"Broad Street is an eccentric, dramatic and pivotal space... The architectural and cultural heritage deserves World Status. The overlap between town, gown and visitor should make it one of the most inclusive parts of the city. The numbers and variety of people who pass through the street have the potential to create an extraordinary place to meet and to linger. The morning and evening light, micro-climate, unfolding sequence of vistas and links to the rest of the city are all excellent. Broad Street appears to have everything. Yet despite these advantages and great potential, Broad Street does not quite work ..."



*The evening light shines along the length of the street.*  
*Photograph: Kim Wilkie Associates*

The idea that Kim Wilkie puts forward is quite simple. It allows Broad Street to work in the way that it should: as a clear, uncluttered space where the architecture can be seen and people can meet, linger and pass through at their own pace. The main elements are:

- pave the eastern end of The Broad as the University 'Square', at the head of the sequence of pedestrian spaces from St Mary's to the New Bodleian;
- open the empty platform outside the New Bodleian as a south-facing café to animate the new square;

- reconnect the western end of The Broad within the framework of the Oxford Transport Strategy;
- reduce the accumulated clutter of street markings, paving materials, signs, furniture and lights to produce a clearer and safer sequence of urban spaces, where the architecture can be read and pedestrians can feel comfortable;
- replant trees in Parks Road, Holywell Street and surrounding Colleges to lean over into the space and bring green shade without interrupting the architectural or ceremonial sequences of the street.

The County Council and the Trust worked closely with Kim Wilkie on his vision, and all of the Steering Group were pleased with the eventual publication which enjoyed a splendid launch in November 2004 at the Divinity School with the Chancellor, the Rt Hon Christopher Patten speaking to officially launch the Plan, later to be joined by the Leader of the County Council, Councillor Keith Mitchell, and of the City Council, Councillor Alex Hollingsworth, who added their endorsements. It was a successful afternoon, itself a demonstration of partnership, with thanks to the Bodleian Library, the County Highways Authority, the University Surveyors and the Old Parsonage Hotel and Jeremy Mogford who kindly arranged the catering.

During the Study the Libraries began to look in earnest at their own accommodation and facilities. The suggestion of the café terrace on the raised platform at the new Bodleian was liked, and now further work is to be done to develop this idea. In addition, the University Surveyors and the City Council are looking to repair and improve Radcliffe Square.

The Trust, who since the publication of the Report have received many letters of support, continue to champion The Broad. An Executive Body is to be set up to take things forward. Further costing and detailed designs are needed, and delivery, phasing and funding are all areas which require more work. It would be of great assistance if the two local authorities, Oxford City and Oxfordshire County Councils, were to adopt the study to make it Supplementary Planning Guidance, which would shape any future development here. In addition, further work is needed to develop the OTS and traffic implications.

It may not be this year or next when we see the Plan in place in its entirety, but the vision is a shared one; Broad Street deserves more than is there at present. The Trust will do its best to make this happen.

D J Dance  
 K Wilkie



*Broad Street East, looking towards Holywell Street, as existing*



*and as proposed.*



*The café on the platform on the New Bodleian would provide south-facing views, seating, refreshment and animation*

*Photograph and Images: Kim Wilkie Associates*