
The Broad Street Plan— A Study for Oxford by Oxford

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'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.'

Foreword to the **Broad Street Plan**
by the Rt Hon Lord Patten of Barnes CH,
Chancellor of the University of Oxford

Oxford Preservation Trust has as one of its main 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 (1980s) with the County Council, the restoration of the Martyrs' Memorial (2002) with the City Council, and, of course, the ongoing Castle Project, due to open in Spring 2006. The Broad Street Plan is another of these collaborative ventures.

The Plan for Broad Street grew out of the Oxford Transport Strategy (OTS, introduced in Spring 1999), which gave the opportunity to make improvements to the public realm, the space between the buildings, not previously possible. By 2001 the OTS was well established and a City Council Public Realm Strategy for the city centre was 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

growing concern for its poor state, its somewhat uncared-for feel and the increasing level of street clutter. Various interesting and innovative ideas had come forward from individuals and groups within the City, including the Friends of the Broad, which needed to be drawn together and taken forward in a considered way. The idea of an independent Study was born.

For the Study to succeed, it needed broad ownership. A Steering Group drew from local, national and south-east agencies; English Heritage, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), Oxfordshire County Council as Highways Authority, Oxford City Council as Planning Authority, the University and Broad Street Colleges, the Oxford Civic Society and the business community. Funding was secured from Oxford Preservation Trust, the two Councils, the University and Colleges in equal measure, with the South East England Development Agency (SEEDA) and the Civic Society contributing.

The appointment of landscape and urban designer Kim Wilkie brought the project to life. As an *alumnus* of New College (1971-74) he had gained a love and knowledge of the city, and brought this to his work. To plan for the future of The Broad, its history and past development needed to be understood, and historians Mavis Batey and David Lambert assisted with this.

As Kim writes:

'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 rôle 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.'

'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.'

Kim spent time understanding the space, and its use. He recognised the importance of its rôle in the wider city, how its width gives it its rather grand, discrete appearance, and how it forms an integral part of the street and traffic system of the city.

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

From the outset the Study engendered a positive response, culminating in a good-tempered meeting of over 80 people at Exeter College in Summer 2003.

'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's idea is simple—a clear, uncluttered space where the architecture can be seen and people can meet, linger and pass through at their own pace:

- 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 Study was launched by the Chancellor at the Divinity School in November 2004 and endorsed by County Council Leader, Councillor Keith Mitchell, and City Council Leader, Councillor Alex Hollingsworth.

During the Study the Libraries began to look at their own accommodation and facilities. The suggestion of the café terrace on the raised platform at the New Bodleian was liked, and further work is to be done to develop this idea.

The next steps

There is still much to do before work can begin on the ground. However, things are moving forward. Work on the cobbles in Radcliffe Square is due to begin shortly, the Libraries are working on their plans and an influential Broad Street Executive Board is meeting in early September to look at what further work is needed and at delivery, phasing, funding and the need to consult. A presentation is being made to the City Council's Central and South West Area Committee in the autumn with the intention of the City adopting the study so that it shapes future development. The County Council has also committed to further work on the traffic implications and highways issues, and to ensure that plans here link in with other developments in the City.

Broad Street deserves more than is there at present. The Trust will do its best to make changes happen.

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