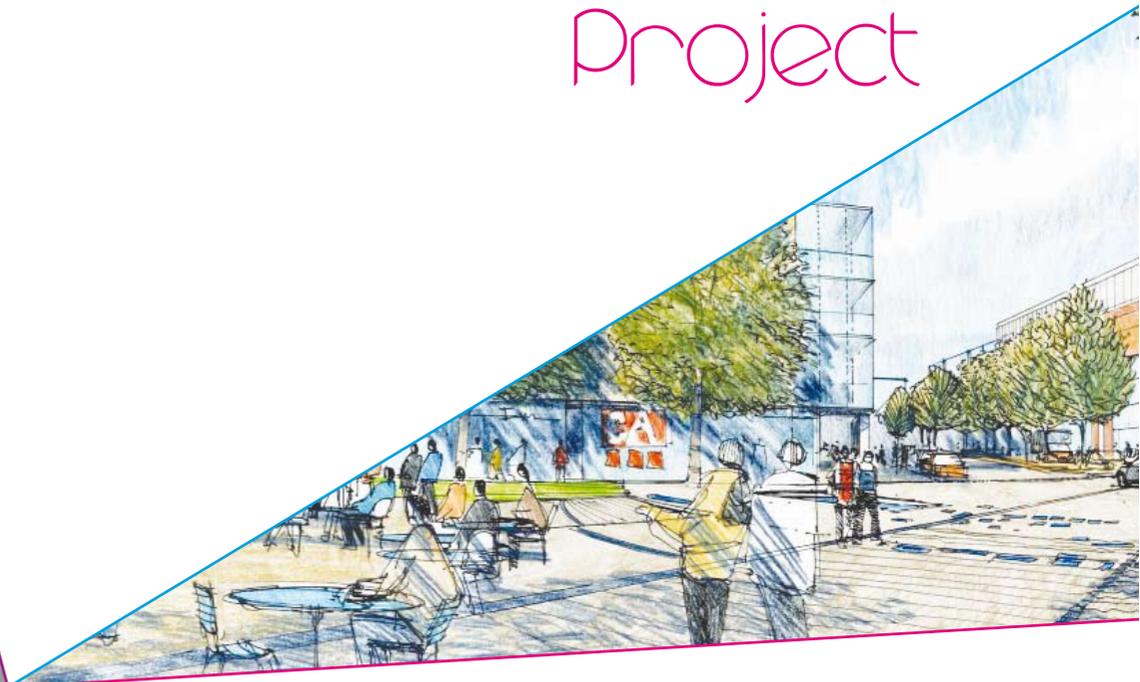


"This urban project reverses old ideas about ring-roading city centres and instead provides civilised streets."

The Ashford Ring Road Scheme was shortlisted for the Prime Minister's Better Public Building Award 2009

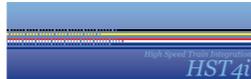
The Ashford Ring Road Project



Ashford
best placed in Britain



This project has received European Regional Development Funding through the INTERREG IIB Community Initiative





£5

June 2009

Disclaimer

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Credits

Client for the Ashford ring road scheme
Kent County Council

Key stakeholders
Ashford Borough Council
The Ashford's Future Company

Major funding partners
Department of Communities and Local Government
European Union
Arts Council
Homes and Communities Agency
SEEDA
Ashford Borough Council
Kent County Council

Consultancy team
Jacobs
Whitelaw Turkington
RKL Public Art Consultants

Advisors
CABE Space
Ben Hamilton-Baillie of Hamilton-Baillie Associates

Artists
John Atkin – Lead artist
Nayan Kulkarni - Lighting
Simeon Nelson – 'Flume'
John Maine – Northern leg
Michael Pinsky – Lost O
Cathy Streeter – 'Till the Cows Come Home'

Major contractors
Jacksons
Ringway

Publicity and press relations
Pillory Barn Creative
Theresa Simon Associates

Photography
Photogenic Images
and **Duncan Callow - Winner of:**
Ashford Best Placed in Britain Photography
Competition (Ashford's Future)
Michael Pinsky
Graham Roberts
Richard Stubbings

Artists impressions
Richard Carman, Architectural Illustrator

Booklet text
Richard Stubbings – Kent County Council
Lindsey Whitelaw – Whitelaw Turkington
Graham Roberts and Andrew Knight – RKL
Jodi Eeles – Pillory Barn Creative

Booklet designed by Pillory Barn Creative on behalf of Kent County Council
Copyright Pillory Barn Creative and contributors 2009
Published by RKL Consultants www.rkl-consultants.org.uk 01924 374293
Further copies available through Kent County Council.
ISBN 978-0-9560275-1-1



The Ashford Ring Road Project



“The fact remains that most of our streets are not civilised, enjoyable places to be.”

CABE Space.

Foreword

Ben Hamilton-Baillie, Urban Design and Movement Specialist

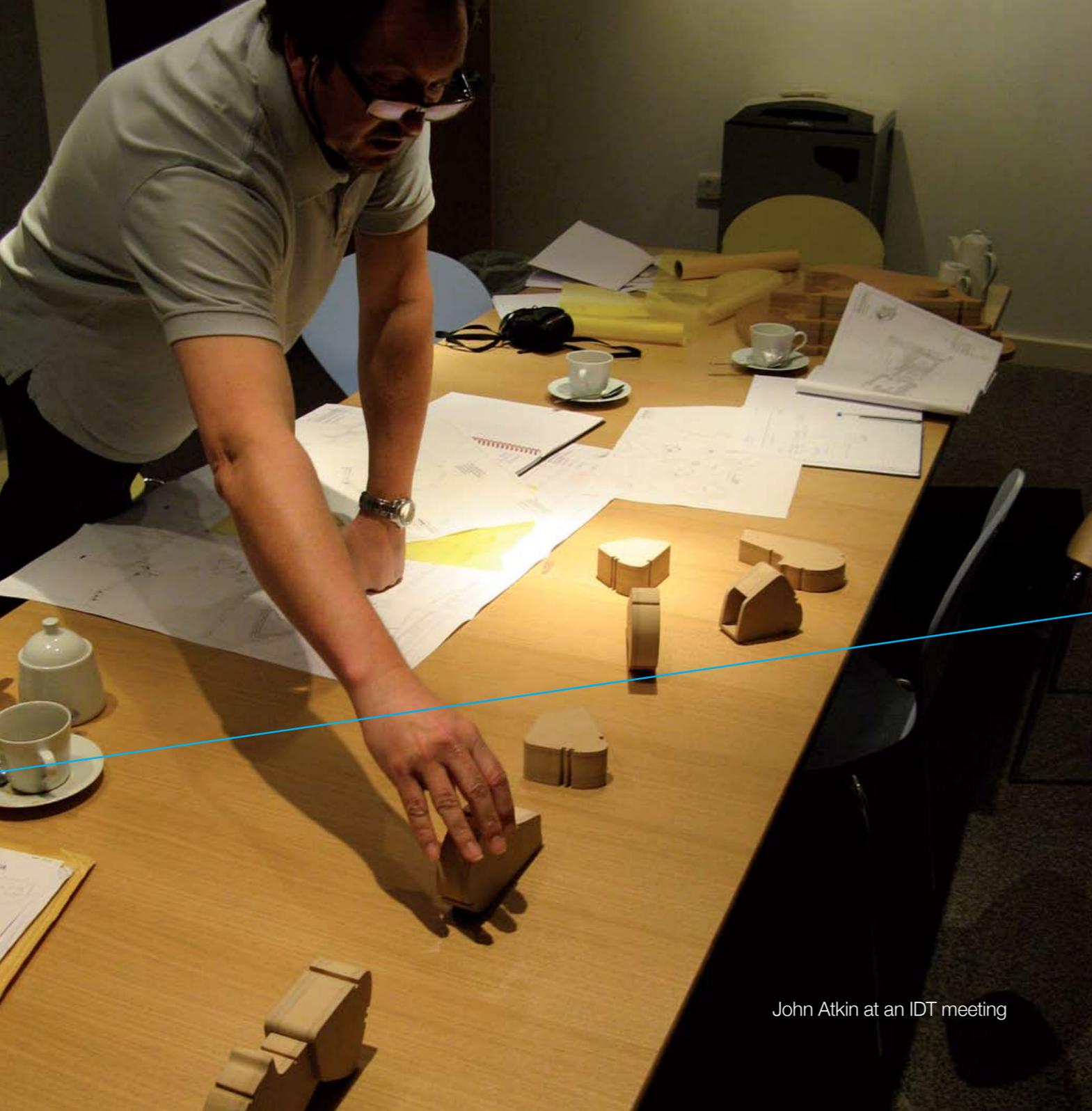
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Radical new departures in urban planning are rare events. Back in 2005, it seemed unlikely that fledgling ideas about shared space and integrated streetscapes could be applied to Ashford’s ugly former ring road. The scale seemed too daunting, and there were still few precedents in the UK to provide reassurance. It was not until Members and Officers from both Ashford and Kent visited established examples of the work of the late Hans Monderman in The Netherlands that one could sense growing confidence that abstract ideas could become reality.

Fortunately for Ashford, the politicians, Officers and their design team held their nerve. Blessed with a scheme champion with the patience, determination and resilience to transcend conventional professional boundaries and inevitable cynicism, a scheme emerged which overcame the usual divisions between engineers and urban designers. As a result, Ashford displays a new model for busy streetscapes that blends art, engineering, craftsmanship and design.

It will take many years until we can fully assess the value of this project. But there is little doubt that when the history of street design in the 21st century is written, the transformation of Ashford’s former ring road will be seen as an important landmark. It has certainly given hope to many other towns blighted by a legacy of ugly segregated highways that traffic movement and street life can be combined to foster civility.

This is the story of the Ashford ring road project as told by the participants.



John Atkin at an IDT meeting

7 Ringing The Changes

Ringling The Changes In Ashford

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Richard Stubbings, Scheme Champion: Kent County Council



“Shifting the balance from a ring road to a network of quality streets and spaces that connect the town centre with surrounding neighbourhoods.”

The Ashford Master Plan Vision

How did it all start?

It would be nice to say that it was all dreamed up in the smoke filled bar of the White Rabbit next to County Hall! However, the reality was that once the Master Plan concluded it as being essential to do something to allow Ashford to grow beyond the straight jacket represented by the old ring road, then it was clear that a major transformational change was needed. From then on the project just grew organically to what we see today.

Following Government's Sustainable Communities Plan in 2003, Ashford was identified as one of the major future growth areas in the south east. The plans were for the then population of 55,000 to double over the next 25 years, with an extra 31,000 homes together with 28,000 jobs being provided by 2031. In the town's *mend before extend* policy the unprecedented step was taken to completely reconfigure the 1970's legacy one-way race track of a ring road. A better balance between the needs of pedestrians and motorists was essential for a town of the future.

A love-hate relationship with the ring road

Our research of opinions had shown that motorists by and large loved the ring road, although often complaining of congestion, but pedestrians hated it and the barrier it created between them and their town centre. The town centre, with its unique medieval core centred on the Parish Church, had been pedestrianised in the past to improve conditions and restrict vehicular traffic. However, this old fashioned concept of pedestrianisation was not going to be possible for the ring road, where it would still be essential to continue to move significant volumes of traffic.

Due to the ring road the town had become very inward facing; there was little street activity along it, although it was very close to the centre. The clear objective of the transformational scheme was to break up the whole concept and feeling of a ring road, and turn the 'roads' that comprised it, into rebuilt multi-purpose quality 'streets' with active frontages. The intention would be that the new streets become destinations in their own right and attractive places for people to visit, live and shop. Clearly there was a major challenge to ensure that these new streets also still fulfilled an important traffic function, needing to accommodate up to 10,000 vehicles per day.

As a wider objective it was judged that by reconfiguring the ring road, the whole town centre could be regenerated. It was urgent to provide the framework for all this to happen before plans were developed to grow the town centre to the south and the east to match an increasing population and business presence. The creation of an attractive public realm of high quality, demonstrating the public authority commitment to the area, was a key part of the planning Master Plan for Ashford's confidence building and growth.

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What we want is a vision!

For the newly conceived public realm what was needed was vision and a will to challenge conventional ways of building highway schemes. In order to steer the design process in this innovative project, a small discussion group was set up to challenge conventional thinking, champion quality urban design, resolve conflicts that arose as the design proceeded, and above all to maintain the vision that had been set for the scheme - the *Champions Group* was born. From the start it was vitally important that it was kept separate from the Project Group responsible for delivering the project to time and to budget, which may otherwise have expediently taken decisions contrary to the vision we had originally set ourselves. This allowed a project, which started as simply to change the one-way traffic flow to two-way, to develop into an innovative and far reaching public realm proposal.

Re-configuring the ring road was a project that always had regeneration at its heart. The clear purpose was to break up the concrete collar around the town centre and create a new multi-purpose *public realm* in its place. Thus easier and safer linkages between people and the town centre would be created. This could be construed as the need to unclog the arteries of the town for pedestrians and to allow the town to breathe again, with some parallels with one of Ashford's famous forebears William Harvey:

“He argued for the idea that blood was pumped around the body before returning to the heart and being recirculated...”

William Harvey, namesake of Ashford Hospital.



“The challenge has been to re-engage the public with the centre of town and the degree of success achieved here should inspire many other similar schemes.” Sustain Magazine

Until August 2005 the term *shared space* was still an unknown to us in Kent County Council (KCC), but then Whitelaw Turkington, our selected urban designers and landscape architects, suggested that we have a presentation from Ben Hamilton-Baillie, which they felt may interest us, based on their own involvement in the Exhibition Road project in London. We met up with him in London and were impressed by what he had to say. He introduced us to the philosophy of shared space and told us how it was working well in Holland and Denmark, although only in its infancy in the UK. The concept was that the public realm space, which was originally the road and the pavement, could in future be shared by drivers and pedestrians, provided that the ‘mental maps’ that drivers had in their heads when driving through the space could be changed. This would involve such measures as reduced speeds by design, removing signs and lines and a drastic narrowing of the old ring road driving space, to ensure that drivers’ attention was inevitably very much focused on their immediate environment.

Our immediate conversion took place to the shared space creed! The mental maps would be changed by removing as many as possible of the drivers’ familiar visual clues i.e. signs, lines and barriers. Furthermore David Engwicht, an Australian sociologist, had proposed the necessity for three ‘mental speed humps’ in any shared space scheme; intrigue, uncertainty and humour and this provided us with just the right framework to change these long-held mental maps.

However, there were, and still are a number of cynics! This necessitated a range of investigations of future and present traffic flows, design studies, considerations for the disabled and a visit for Council Members and Officers to schemes in Holland. Here we met the accepted leader in the philosophy, the

late Hans Monderman, an eminent Dutch traffic engineer. The outcome was positive and shared space was formally adopted as our fundamental design philosophy.

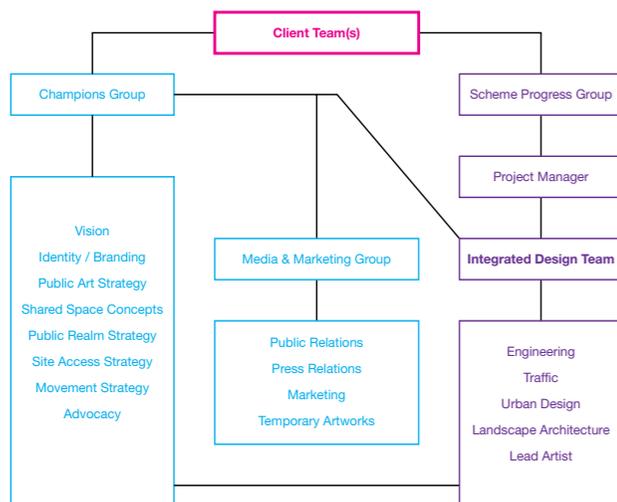
What happened next was that KCC made an approach to CABE Space to see if they would like to be involved in the project - they said they would and one of their facilitators, Peter Fink, could be made available to us to tell us about public art and how that could help to create a distinctive public realm. It was a promising area to pursue and it could provide us with some of the mental speed humps that David Engwicht proposed. Thus the concept of art in engineering was born, which led to the appointment of Public Art Consultants, RKL to assist in the appointing and managing of artists. They proposed the appointment of a number of artists including a Director of Temporary Artworks. The idea of the latter was to raise the cultural agenda in Ashford, and to prepare the public for the sight of contemporary artwork on their streets.

The birth of an IDT

We now had highway engineers, traffic planners, urban designers, landscape architects and artists on board with a need to get them all working together to produce a single integrated design, rather than ending up with several designs! The concept of an Integrated Design Team (IDT) was born. To arrive at our ultimate goal was going to involve a journey of discovery and enlightenment for those involved, with an essential prerequisite for enthusiasm, a willingness to try something different and to challenge conventional wisdom; characteristics not often enough associated with local government officers, particularly conventional highway engineers!

The IDT was recruited with the mission to pursue a quest for quality urban design, distinctiveness and

Project 'Family Tree'



functionality. Members of the team were engineering consultants Jacobs, landscape architects and urban designers Whitelaw Turkington, public art consultants RKL and the three artists for this part of the ring road changes. The nationally acclaimed artists appointed were Lead Artist John Atkin, Lighting Strategy Artist Nayan Kulkarni, Simeon Nelson to work on an individual piece forming a way marking through the scheme and Michael Pinsky as Director of Temporary Artworks.

It was vital that all members of the IDT effectively started work together on the scheme design to ensure that no entrenched positions (design ideas) were arrived at before others had the opportunity to participate. In the event the IDT worked very well together and the outcome of the IDT meetings was impressive. The clear extremes of the discipline spectrum were obvious as engineers and the artists started work, but in the event each learnt a lot from the other.

The work was at the 'cutting edge' of the design process and the two parallel streams of Champions Group and Project Design Group were essential to keep this on track. The IDT was managerially in the Project Design Group but certain members also attended the Champions Group where wider ranging debates on concepts, ideas and practicalities took place.

Communicating with Stakeholders

In any innovative project, communication of the ideas is vitally important. This needs to cover Council Members, other officer groups including safety auditors, the general public, particular interest groups, stakeholders and the media. For this scheme it was decided to include in the project structure a full time Media and Marketing Group chaired by the Scheme Champion, and local and national public relations consultants were retained; Pillory Barn Creative and Theresa Simon Associates. Within the Group they worked with KCC's Press Relations Office, the Ashford's Future Media Team and members of the technical team.

Council Members needed to be effectively taken on the same journey as the project team in order to be convinced that the chosen approach was the right one, and so that they could support the scheme with their constituents. As well as presentations to Member Committees, a small group of key Members was formed, which met informally before work over coffee in a local hotel for an hour or so on a monthly basis. This gave a regular opportunity for ideas to be exchanged and immediate feedback obtained. This proved to be a very useful forum, particularly as far as public art issues were concerned. Council Members were also invited to take part in a study visit to Holland with Ben Hamilton-Baillie and the late Hans Monderman - this proved an essential and beneficial experience.

It is also important to include other Officer Groups in the communication process. A lot of them will be unfamiliar with innovative concepts and therefore may adopt a somewhat defensive posture. The essence of a shared space philosophy is to reduce signing and lining to a minimum and this means getting back to what is actually regulatory, and initially putting on one side what has built up as advisory and so called good practice.

Interestingly in the safety audit process there is a safety paradox in the design of such a scheme, and 'human risk compensation', as explored by Professor John Adams of University College London, is essential to the understanding of why shared space principles work. The safety paradox is clearly demonstrated by many schemes in the Netherlands and Denmark, but also closer to home in Kensington High Street. Here many restrictions to pedestrians and driver clues in the way of signing and guard railing have been removed. The safety record has improved significantly there over the last four years.

Interest groups and stakeholders clearly need to be involved as for any scheme and in particular several early meetings were held with groups representing the disabled. Fundamental principles of shared space were discussed and several specific features were included in the scheme such as a full textured paving guide path for blind and partially sighted long cane users, a 50mm kerb upstand throughout the linear parts of the scheme (again for long cane users and guide dogs), a light controlled pedestrian crossing at the busiest points where the bus-stops are and a number of courtesy crossings, as well as all the many other items relating to good practice at steps and crossings.

In order to gain community ownership of the residential part of the scheme (West Street) design work for this area was undertaken with



representatives of the local residential community. This was in the true spirit of the David Engwicht's principle of reclaiming the streets for the community. Two very useful workshop meetings were held in The Oranges public house adjacent to the old ring road. These established an agreed framework for this part of the scheme; a separated carriageway with central walkway area; a small square for community use, a viewpoint to the south and linear planted 'rain gardens' providing sustainable urban drainage and a general softening of the scheme. This approach to the overall design was consistent with 'breaking up' the old ring road into a series of different street designs each with an entirely different feel.

Although generally supported by the national media, relations with the local media proved extremely challenging. At an early stage they set up a *Ring Road Watch* and the types of articles written were often not favourable to the project. This press

relations issue would be a very key factor in any further such schemes.

Other key aspects of public relations were the eight issues of the information leaflet *Breaking Boundaries* and the two major campaigns *Go Two Ways About It*, when the ring road was changed to two-way traffic flow and *Shared Space – Special Place* when shared space was opened in Elwick Road and West Street. Also the *Lost O* programme of temporary artworks curated by Michael Pinsky raising the public art profile in the town and coinciding with the visit of the Tour de France in June 2007.

The Award Winning scheme itself

The whole of the old ring road has been converted to two-way traffic flow and initially the south-western side and the town centre access have been re-designed using the shared space philosophy. This comprises Elwick Road, West Street and Bank Street.

Elwick Road runs east to west and passes through the newly built Elwick Square – a major new civic space. It passes from predominantly business and mixed use at its eastern end to residential use at its western end, where it turns north and becomes a separated carriageway; West Street, encompassing a *pocket park* (which is a small garden in the centre of West Street separating the two lane traffic). Linking Elwick Road to the heart of the town centre is Bank Street which currently provides the major bus stopping facilities in the town.

Using the pioneering shared space philosophy for the design makes this scheme stand out from the normal, with the potential to civilise the roads that made up the notorious ring road. It is believed to be the largest shared space scheme yet to be implemented in the UK and has already won a number of major national awards. Unnecessary street furniture, pedestrian guard railings, road markings

and traffic signals have been removed from all the streets and the speed limit decreased to 20 miles per hour in the shared space area. This enables better direct communication and respect between all road users, whilst artist designed elements enhance the street scene. The shared space comprises a series of links and nodes such as Elwick Square and in essence seeks to provide a public realm that is suitable and safe for all.

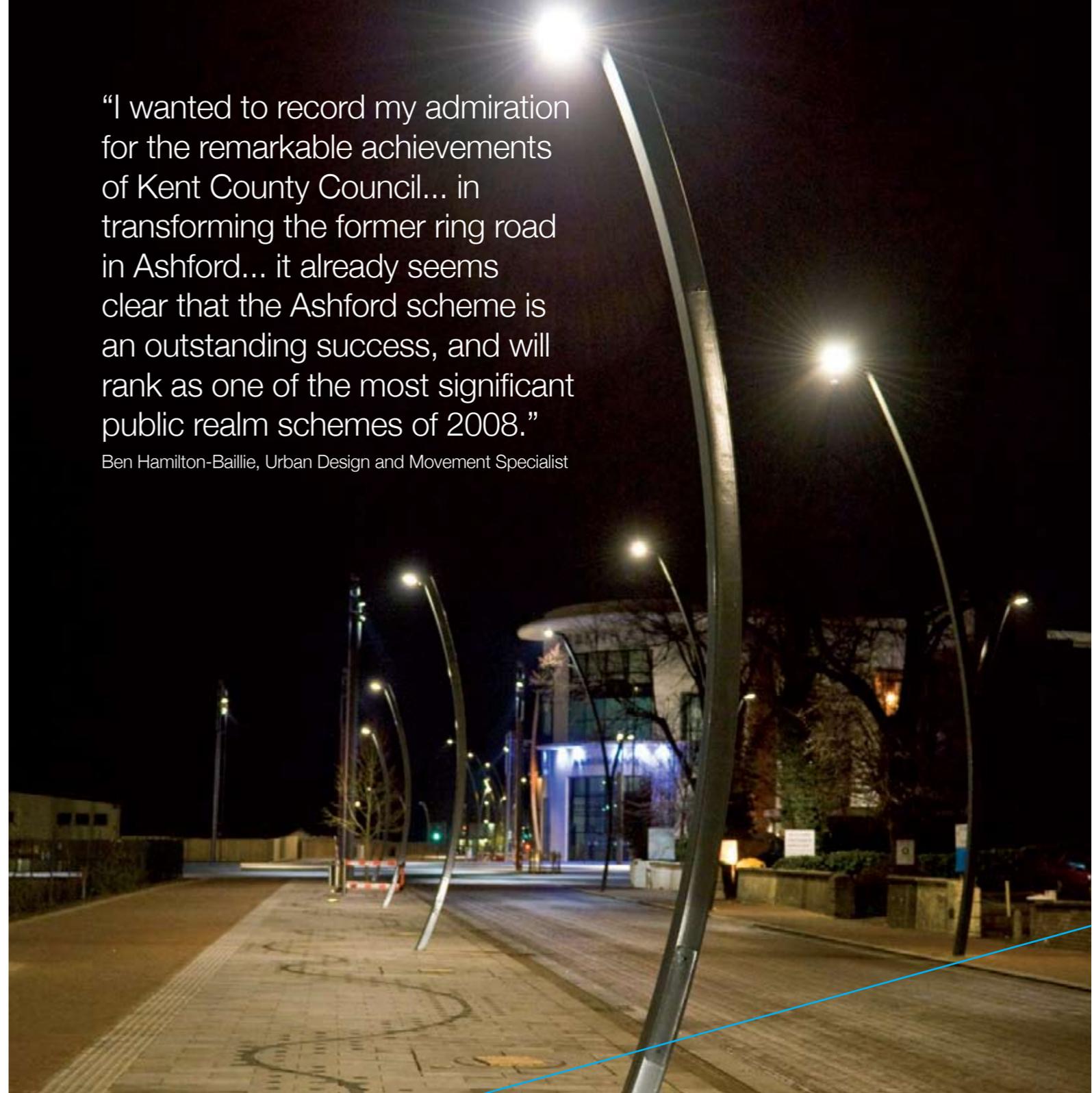
It is essential for shared space to remove all of the visual clues on which the driver normally relies. If a compromise solution is sought then the whole philosophy will very likely fail and the scheme will become less safe. The Champions Group was successful in maintaining this objective through all the design and audit and introducing the necessary checks and balances.

It is planned that this shared space scheme will not only breathe life back into Ashford town centre, but will also reduce the number of road casualties substantially compared to more conventional plans. Certainly over the first six months there have been no personal injury accidents in the area.

It is anticipated that with proven success this scheme will significantly influence thinking on the design of public realm in the UK in the future, and it has already created substantial interest amongst many other Local Authorities who are now thinking in a similar way. Conducted visits have already been given to other Authorities and organisations, and also to the Department for Transport who will be monitoring the scheme as part of a research programme. It is anticipated that this scheme will be a landmark in public realm design. Not least the scheme will make a real difference to the community.

“I wanted to record my admiration for the remarkable achievements of Kent County Council... in transforming the former ring road in Ashford... it already seems clear that the Ashford scheme is an outstanding success, and will rank as one of the most significant public realm schemes of 2008.”

Ben Hamilton-Baillie, Urban Design and Movement Specialist





Block laying in Elwick Square

The Designer's Perspective

Ashford's Ring Road Transformed: The Designer's Perspective

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Lindsey Whitelaw: Whitelaw Turkington

The Ashford ring road transformation from a one-way, constricting, vehicle dominated collar, to a series of integrated streets and spaces, arose out of the brief to create a unique and distinctive public realm for the town. With the public realm limited to essentially the highway, the only way to create this uniqueness and distinctiveness was to transform people's perception of the road itself. 'Reclaiming' the public realm from vehicular dominated space has always been at the heart of our design ethos. We were inspired by the work of Dutch Engineer Hans Monderman, and Ashford presented the perfect opportunity to introduce his successful shared space approach. With this approach traffic accidents are reduced by removing traditional highway signage and markings, and an element of uncertainty is introduced as to who has priority. Drivers, cyclists and pedestrians have to negotiate their way through the spaces and in so doing, are encouraged to look out for themselves and each other; in other words, encouraged to be civil. Some have described it as effectively throwing away the highway design rule book.

The vision

Whitelaw Turkington's involvement in Ashford started with the commission to work on a Public Realm Strategy for Ashford town centre and a pilot project on Bank Street. This Strategy was commissioned to 'put some flesh on the bones' of the Development Framework in order to secure a level of quality in the design of the public realm for future development. The pilot project on Bank Street was therefore designed and detailed in parallel with the development of the Public Realm Strategy.

Our brief was to deliver a unique and distinctive public realm which promoted a healthy walkable town. This was some challenge, given that the available public realm was mostly under the jurisdiction of highways and, with the exception of the County Square shopping mall on Bank Street and Elwick Road, no new development was coming forward to redefine the edges of this public realm.

The Greater Ashford and Town Centre Development Frameworks had established the need to reduce the severance of the ring road and make it two-way in order to promote town centre growth to the south. Central to the Public Realm Strategy was the aspiration to take this movement strategy a step further and transform the entire ring road into a series of interconnected and integrated town centre streets and places.

We were then commissioned to design and deliver the first phase of the transformation of the ring road along Elwick Road and West Street. These were seen as the key priority sections in that they adjoined primary town centre development sites to the south. This phase was completed in November 2008 and will be described in detail below. The remainder of the ring road has been converted to a two-way flow with improved, straight-across pedestrian crossings

and providing low-key improvements until funding is in place to complete the higher quality works.

The heart of Ashford's town centre had already been partially pedestrianised. Although a little tired, the intimate scale and character of the old town, clustered around St Mary's Church, and the medieval "T" formed by High Street, New Street and Bank Street is still intact. On the periphery however, the 20th Century insertions and expansion had in places eroded the quality of the town. Visitors arriving at the station would either be taken on a tour of the ring road oblivious of the charms of this old market town, or struggle to find a pleasant walk from the station to the centre.

Improvements to the arrival experience and the connection from station to town centre was key to making a difference. Our earlier work on Exhibition Road prompted us to promote the concept of shared space or the 'integrated street' on these key links between the town centre and station.

An integrated and inter-disciplinary design team

The challenge was how to put this vision into practice and overcome the traditional approach to highway design. Kent County Council's (KCC) Regeneration Team, through the scheme's Champion, Richard Stubbings, supported the creation of an inter-disciplinary Integrated Design Team (IDT) from the outset. At the detailed design stage the team was led by Whitelaw Turkington, with latter stages being shared equally between KCC's engineering consultants, Jacobs, and ourselves.

By inviting Urban Design and Movement Specialist, Ben Hamilton-Baillie, to a one day workshop at the beginning of the project, the principles and European precedents of shared space were thoroughly explored, and the client readily signed

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up to progressing the integrated street approach. We designed the spaces from edge to edge and then made the vehicular movements work within the space rather than working with what was left over after the engineers had applied their swept paths, etc. The long journey to convince any remaining sceptics was eased by the establishment of a Champions Group comprising specialists from all areas of expertise and interest. This Group ensured that the ideals and aspirations of this approach were not compromised by traditional, single issue, pragmatic solutions.

Marrying art, environment and engineering

In order to introduce the innovative and distinctive elements which would set Ashford apart, other than the pretty radical approach to the change in traffic priority, it was also proposed that artists were integrated into the design team from the beginning. Art and engineering should have equal weight with environment in the design of the public realm. This has led to a healthy and, at times challenging marriage between the creative and the functional. Yet as a consequence, the resulting works are truly embedded not only in the engineering and functioning of the street, but also in the context of Ashford.

As Ashford rises above the flood plain of the River Stour, the issues of water management initiated a narrative, which we have expressed in the design of the public realm through the introduction of Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SUDS). In West Street the 'rain gardens' form part of a linear 'pocket park' running down the middle of the road and a swale will be built to the south of Elwick Square. In Bank Street and Elwick Road, as it was difficult to retrofit SUDS in an existing street, we have worked with artist Simeon Nelson to develop

a linear floorscape sculpture embedded into the granite paving. The piece entitled 'Flume' reveals and celebrates local topographical and hydrological characteristics, and as an integrated part of the drainage system, traces the normally hidden engineered processes of rainwater management within the urban realm.

Two other artists were also appointed as part of the IDT from inception to completion. John Atkin has taken reference from Ashford's engineering past and used forms (amongst others) from the tannery industry to establish a DNA which permeates the street at a range of scales, from the surface inlaid forms and sculptural features at West Square, which literally directs traffic through the space, to more subtle small scale interventions such as bespoke bollards, tree grilles and seating.

Nayan Kulkarni has designed a series of curved lighting columns creating a distinctive rhythm along the street, and proposed iconic 10, 12 and 14 metre high columns, with fully adjustable gimble-mounted light fittings, to increase light intensity and change colour temperature at key junctions and spaces along the street. Placement of the columns also provide visual clues and subtly help direct traffic in the shared surface areas, such as the new civic square.

In addition to using the knowledge and resources within the IDT, all three artists have also brought in expert external advice as required in order to resolve technical issues as designs have developed. For instance, Pinneger & Partners provided specialist lighting advice to Nayan Kulkarni. Simeon Nelson has worked closely with Hardscape to develop a methodology for reproducing his linear artwork as a series of individual water jet cut granite paving flags, which were then assembled on site like a giant jigsaw. John Atkin worked with City Squared and a number of furniture suppliers to work out



the ergonomics, materials and other technical requirements of his bespoke street furniture.

To mark the moment when the ring road converted to two-way and to celebrate the Tour De France passing through, a series of temporary art interventions known as the 'Lost O' were launched. It transformed what could have been mayhem and irritation during the transition period, into a celebration. Throughout the project publicity campaigns have been invaluable in promoting the scheme at local and national levels.

Engagement and re-education

The 'Lost O' was only one of the ways in which the project has been brought to the attention of the local and national audiences. Such a transformation of the ring road has required an extensive programme of consultation and in some ways re-education. The clear need for information dissemination led to the

setting up of a Media and Marketing Group which ran parallel with the Champions Group and has been invaluable in promoting the scheme. Public consultation has been held at all stages of the project and ranged from large scale events in the High Street to smaller scale presentations to local residents and stakeholders. Local community consultation was used to develop the scheme for West Street 'pocket park' and ensured concerns over safety and security were addressed in the design. Construction tenders were not only assessed in terms of quality and cost, but also with a major emphasis on how contractors would phase work and ensure an on-going dialogue with local residents and businesses.

In addition, some of the proposals required very specific consultation with access and disability groups, who had concerns over the removal of standard highway features. A series of meetings



Bank Street: After



Bank Street: Before

with representatives from local access groups, the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association and long cane users was set up, and comments and concerns addressed in the design. For instance, although the streetscape materials are consistent within the vehicle and pedestrian zones, a low 50mm kerb up-stand has been retained to provide guidance for the visually impaired. In Elwick Square a creation of a shared surface means the traditional kerb line has been removed and both traffic and pedestrians must carefully negotiate the space with equal priority. In order to address concerns regarding the lack of recognisable edges for both guide dogs and the visually impaired, a tactile guidance strip has been carefully designed into the square to provide a safe route away from moving vehicles.

The other key concern raised in our discussions was the intention to remove all signalised crossings from the scheme and to provide courtesy crossings along natural desire lines for pedestrians crossing the road. In order for the shared space concept to work we felt it was important not to give mixed messages to users of the street by reintroducing standard highway signs, lines and signals into a scheme which relies on less formal, social rules implicit in the use of the street. This approach was backed up by the Safety Audit, which also considered the potential risks of mixed messages.

Nevertheless it was decided that given the predicted volume of traffic (around 10,000 vehicles/day), and the valid concerns over negotiating a courtesy crossing without the possibility of driver/pedestrian eye contact, a signalised crossing would be introduced. To limit its adverse impact on the scheme, it has been designed with minimum requirements for lining and associated visual clutter, and positioned to the west of Elwick Square opposite the entrance to the new shopping centre extension.

Materials and technical specification

The appearance of the street is paramount in providing the required signals to drivers about appropriate behaviour and speed in a scheme of this nature. For this reason we worked hard to ensure there was a complete environmental transformation at the transition point from traditional highway to shared space. Although the usual forest of signage is required at the entry to the scheme (for example, a 20mph zone, restricted parking zone etc) within the new streetscape it was important to give only psychological clues to drivers. This is achieved through the layout of the space and the language of materials used rather than through highway traffic calming, cameras, signs and markings.

To give the impression of one unified linear space we specified one consistent material which would be used in the carriageway and footway. The road was narrowed to visually appear 6m wide although a half metre overrun strip was included to cope with cyclists and the park and ride buses which will run along the street. Shallow 50mm kerbs at the entry points to the scheme, and additional slight rises in the carriageways on the approach to each shared space junction, establishes a subtle gateway at each transition point. Lighting, tree planting, seating and cycle stands were also used to provide environmental improvements and complete the transformation from highway to public realm.

The technical performance, 'buildability' and maintenance were as much of a consideration as aesthetics when it came to material specification. Both the design team and client were insistent on using high quality natural materials to set the standard for future town centre projects and provide an enduring design aesthetic.

A slim-line natural clay paver by Vande Moortel has been specified in footways and carriageways with a mid-grey granite used to form kerbs, edgings and at key spaces such as Elwick Square, Centrepiece Plaza in Bank Street and to provide courtesy crossings at junctions. Jacobs were able to provide expert advice on the specification and sub-base design for the granite setts in areas with relatively high volumes of traffic. A trip to Belgium to look at the clay pavers in-situ helped persuade the client and officers in charge of maintenance of their suitability, including the revelation that chewing gum did not appear to stick to the surface!

Lessons learnt

Six months into the scheme Ashford's integrated street proved to have achieved all that we as designers had anticipated. In Elwick Square, where the shared surface is truly a naked street, we have watched vehicles, cyclists and pedestrians negotiate their way across in the polite and civilised manner that we had hoped. To the clients delight, and inline with our expectations, there have been no accidents in the first six months.

However, there are some points which we should bring to bear on future schemes. We have watched vehicles slowing down as they approach the courtesy crossings but speeding up as they approach the signalised crossing in order to beat the red light. In addition, there have been debates and differences of opinion within the local access groups over the extent of the tactile paving marking the crossings. The slip road to the County Square parking also presents a challenge to traffic management which has yet to be resolved. Importantly the parking and signing strategy needs to be in place and agreed from the outset in order to design in any required markings, should they be unavoidable, rather than a need to retrofit.

In reviewing the factors which have contributed to the design and delivery of a scheme as pioneering as this project, there are some vital elements which have to be in place:

- A strong overall framework and vision to drive the project forward
- A design led approach with an emphasis on *place making* with a new interpretation of the use of highway standards and guidelines
- An enlightened client, which helps if they also happen to be the local Highway Authority
- An integrated, multi-disciplinary design team
- An inclusive approach requiring extensive consultation
- The careful specification and detailing of materials to meet a set of demanding performance criteria
- And political support at high level



“There is no doubt that in the future, when the history of urbanism and public space in the 21st Century is written, the scheme in Ashford will be seen as a really important landmark... the first large scale scheme to consciously tackle a major traffic issue through shared space.”

Ben Hamilton-Baillie, Urban Design and Movement Specialist







Lost O - Akay & Made: Toy House

Making Space

Making Space

Engaging the skills and imagination of artists in an integrated design team, to humanise the highway

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Graham Roberts and Andrew Knight: RKL Consultants

The public realm plays an important role in our daily lives and has a considerable impact on the success of our enterprises. Civic spaces, regardless of scale, must be designed and maintained as well as we are able, because good design brings economic, environmental and social benefits and, self evidently, bad design brings economic, environmental and social cost.

Towns and cities compete for investment and it is clear that characterful places have a competitive edge over bland, homogenous, nondescript places and all those engaged in urban design should strive to make places that are not just useable, but that lift the spirits and are enjoyable, sustainable and socially inclusive.

Artists are well placed to contribute to the design and social processes employed in restoring life to degraded spaces and creating new ones. Through their lateral thinking and approach to looking at things differently they are most capable of finding, drawing out, and expressing the character of a place through their work. Therefore a role for the artist, within regeneration, is to bring thoughtful expression to the place making process.

Conventional wisdom in the public art world suggests that it is best to engage the artist at the very earliest point in the design process, so that a scheme could be the beneficiary of the artist's creativity as a conceptualist rather than as a mere decorator. This was understood by the ring road scheme's design Champion, and Roberts Knight Leeds Metropolitan University Consultants (RKL) were appointed in December 2005 and asked to devise a method of bringing artists into an Integrated Design Team (IDT) comprising landscape architects, urban designers and highways engineers.

Breaking Boundaries

In January 2006 we attended a commissioning meeting with our client, Kent County Council (KCC) and following that meeting we strove to gain an understanding of Ashford and its needs. In February we presented our programme which we called 'Breaking Boundaries', to acknowledge the breaking of the 'concrete collar', which the 1970's ring road had imposed on the town, and also because we intended to break with traditional methods of highway design and procurement – methods that often produce an urban landscape of staggering banality.

Breaking Boundaries had the principal aim of making the re-configured shared space ring road a place rather than a space, a destination in its own right as much as a means of travelling between or to other places, and our programme identified a number of generic opportunities which artists could explore through their collaborative work with the IDT.



Akay's Paper House - taken over by local artists

These included:

- Quality and character of spatial form, finish and experiences
- Gateways – to emphasise points of arrival/ departure, and providing connections between the town centre and its surrounding environs
- Landmarks – providing focal points, aiding orientation and signifying links to the wider surrounding landscape
- Linear/Serial Works – to identify and articulate pedestrian transit routes and to encourage movement through and across the new spaces
- Public Spaces/Pocket Parks – to create atmosphere, sensory delight and secure spaces for social engagement, rest and play
- Street Furniture – to encourage humanity, imagination and environmental sensitivity in the high quality design of essential utilities in the street scene
- Lighting – to create a unique night time presence throughout the entire length of the re-configured ring road and responsive to the character areas which it links
- Temporary Events & Installations – opportunities for temporary interventions during the construction phase to engage people in the process of renewal and subsequently celebrate 'ownership' and 'occupancy' of the new space
- Community Collaboration – engagement with a wider, neighbourhood, audience in the design process for discreet spaces

We needed the right artists to make it happen!

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Selecting the artists

The artists RKL selected to join the IDT were John Maine, John Atkin and Nayan Kulkarni. Simeon Nelson had previously been engaged by Ashford Borough Council to work with Whitelaw Turkington, and his thinking for the linear floor piece 'Flume' was already advanced.

As public art consultants we hold an extensive database of artists' work and over the years we have had the pleasure of working with many good artists on schemes large and small. A key consideration that shaped our choices was the previous experience of the artists, as we were well aware that the timing of the design stages of the Ashford project would put the artists under pressure to complete their conceptual thinking and then their detailed design work to a tight schedule.

Whilst our main thrust was to facilitate the integrated artworks that would become a part of the new landscape of Ashford we also wanted to introduce a surprise element. To do this we created a brief for an artist to devise a programme of challenging temporary works on a transport theme. After interview Michael Pinsky was selected and his programme titled *The Lost O* took Ashford by storm.

John Maine has created significant works for important sites across the UK, including Portland Bill and the Southbank Centre. His work with the IDT was on the northern section of the ring road, a section that has now been re-scheduled for the future delivery phases.

John Atkin's work can be found on prominent sites around the world. We thought his bold style, with its strong individual forms, would work well with the eco-sensibility of landscape architects Whitelaw Turkington and the collaboration allowed John to look at Elwick Road in its entirety and contribute his

thinking on the form of the hard landscape itself.

Nayan Kulkarni has worked on many architectural and public realm projects and, in particular, we thought his work with lighting technologies would raise the game in Ashford. His considered street lighting colour strategy, that differentiated between residential and commercial areas and re-connected the town centre with its previously severed neighbourhoods, and his family of bespoke lighting columns have established Ashford as a leader in this field.

Simeon Nelson is an artist with an interest in the shared languages and underlying aesthetic concerns that occur within different art forms. He also has a passion for exploring how humans and nature interact, and his work frequently involves collaborations with structural engineers, biologists, dancers and others. In his work he uses analogies and metaphors from science, philosophy and theology, made manifest in physical (often fractal) forms.

Michael Pinsky takes on the multiple roles of artist, activist, planner and provocateur, and social space as much as physical space provides the context for his work. In response to a brief, which asked him to mark the passing of the ring road, and to explore issues of public space through sometimes playful and subversive means, he conceived a multi-artist temporary works programme that was delivered during the middle of the construction period, which resonates in Ashford to this day.

Inevitably Breaking Boundaries had both wins and losses. Not every collaboration proved to be a 'marriage made in heaven', yet some thrived wonderfully well and are still thriving and developing in other projects, in Ashford and elsewhere. This is invariably the way with integrated design team working. Some relationships spark the creative process and produce much more than the sum of the parts. Others never quite get there and the

relationship is stilted and awkward. It is unpredictable, but when it works well it is very exciting indeed.

John Atkin began with research into the town's history and in the recent industrial past he found a shape that became known as the DNA of the scheme. This simple leather worker's pattern was cleverly translated into many forms including tree grilles, bollards, seats and benches. But his tour-de-force was the large *not-a-roundabout* feature, so called because a roundabout is freighted with design regulations that would have imposed black and white chevrons and reflective stripes on his corten steel centrepiece sculpture. Not-a-roundabout, the tree grilles and the bollards have been installed, but not all of his superb granite seats seem likely to be commissioned due to pressure on scheme finances.

Nayan Kulkarni conducted a zonal study that provided a rationale for the colour and intensity of

light at different locations along the route of the ring road. He considered lighting the needs of the pedestrian and vehicular activities along the route and also thought about the possibility of using light to help stitch the severed residential streets back to the town centre. Nayan then designed a family of bespoke lighting columns. These now march proudly up Elwick Road and they bring a confident air of design quality to Elwick Square, Ashford's new major public space.

Flume the linear floorscape sculpture by Simeon Nelson, runs down Bank Street and east along Elwick Road, making an artistic link between the town centre and the International Station. It is an elegant work that adds an intelligent presence to the street scene.





Lost O - Roadsworth: Universal Synchronicity

Lost O

'Lost O', the programme of temporary works devised and curated by Michael Pinsky, was delivered during July 2007, on the weekend that the Tour de France came to Ashford. Lost O was the recipient of a £50,000 award from Arts Plus, an Arts Council and SEEDA joint venture to encourage high quality public art projects in south east England. This award enabled an international arts programme to be delivered without compromise.

The eleven Lost O artists came from Sweden, USA, Canada, France and the UK and some of their works proved challenging to some people. In particular Akay's papered house that became a canvas for enterprising graffiti and Brad Downey's 'Long Weight' – a pelican crossing control box placed at an unfeasible 9ft off the ground, caused a prominent local politician to have a very public apoplexy, and it was suggested, shabbily and ludicrously by one local paper, that Michael Pinsky's own sculpture, made from redundant road signs, would make drivers attempt to drive the wrong way around a non-existent roundabout. But most local people appreciated the intelligence, skill and humour of the artists.

There were two almost immediate 'spin-offs' from the Lost O programme involving up-and-coming local artists. Oliver Winconeck, one of the graffiti artists for the papered house, produced a major work called Nimby at his own expense on wasteland near the railway station. The other was commissioned by SEEDA from Cathy Streeter entitled *Till the Cows Come Home*; an interactive sound work, which also involved engraving shadowy images of cows on 100 metres of bland brick wall along Elwick Road, opposite the new County Square shopping centre, as a reminder of the cattle market previously located here. The artwork was also nominated for the Rouse Kent Art Award.

The Champions Group

Breaking Boundaries tested the resolve of many of the ring road players, but its key elements were all delivered and the artists, working closely with the other members of the IDT, creatively contributed to an award winning exemplar of good design.

A major contributing factor to this success was the influence of the Champions Group, a small group of interested professionals, whose role was to try to ensure that the quest for good design and quality materials was not broken on the altar of cost efficiency and short term expediency. In particular the Champions Group meetings provided a valuable opportunity for the artists to meet those professionals who were not formally part of the design team but whose influence could not be discounted for example, the highway maintenance engineers. These meetings gave rise to much discussion on the cost and value of particular materials and exposure of the 'whole-life cost' issue, wherein high quality but low maintenance materials such as granite could be favourably compared with low cost but high maintenance tarmac over the whole life of the project

Were it not for the Champions Group, under the leadership of Richard Stubbings, it is unlikely that the scheme would have achieved the very high standards of design that now set it apart from nearly all other highway schemes in the UK.

Of course the functionality and sustainability of the design of the Ashford shared space project can only properly be judged over time, but the work and thinking of the artists has been firmly embedded in the scheme and helped to create an active, attractive environment for the people of Ashford to enjoy. It is a place worth visiting.

Shared Space Special Place

EMERGENCY EXIT - BREAK GLASS

at the of Ashford

Bank Street - Elwick Road - West Street

New rules from 31st October

SHARED SPACE



N601 KGF

Ashford



Communicating Change

Communicating Change For Ashford

Jodi Eeles: Pillory Barn Creative

Pillory Barn Creative is a marketing and communications agency in Kent.

Our first involvement with the Ashford ring road was a contract to communicate the cultural aspect that the project was bringing to the town in the form of a temporary artworks programme (Lost O) during the digging up of the roads. From this experience it became obvious that there was an opportunity for the project team to receive the support of a communications agency for the remainder of the scheme, so that they could concentrate their skills on their own areas of expertise. This was a major contract of just over two years and it was full of challenges!

Ashford has a history of being a well loved market town, with a major cattle market at its centre. As the town grew over the years the cattle market moved out of the town. This movement of the market had left the southern area of the town barren and ripe for regeneration.

Regional Planning Guidance for the south east identified Ashford as one of four key growth areas where the government allocated the area as being particularly suited to future growth and opportunities.

One key project needed to help deliver this objective was the transformation of the Ashford ring road, which was proving to be constricting and unable to allow for the growth of the town in its current form.

The residents were becoming familiar with words such as; 'plans for growth, new projects, investment, regeneration.' This built up anticipation for the changes, and residents eagerly awaited them for their new town.

However, regeneration projects happen over long periods of time and they had to suffer the upheaval of several projects, with the changes of the ring road being one of the most disruptive. Clear communications was one tool that could help to keep them up to date as to what was happening, when and why.



Why is communication so important?

When there is a project that affects your daily life, route to work, job or the future of your children, you have a vested interest to keep up to date with what is going on around you. The changes to Ashford were going to have a major but positive impact on all of its residents, but this impact could be seen as negative if residents didn't know what the end result would be. If all they see is temporary traffic lights, queues of cars and daily changes to their roads, then this will inevitably build up frustration and anger.

Our job was to keep them as up to date as possible about which changes were taking place, where, why and how. Even if it was a case of just letting them know when the road works would be taking place, so they could re-plan their route to work, or better still leave their car at home and walk the children to school instead.

A large project such as this was inevitably going to impact on the daily lives of those who lived

and worked in Ashford's town centre. The most important part of a community is its people, and we wanted those people to be given as much information as possible about the changes.

At the very start of the project there were consultations with the public in a marquee in the heart of the town centre an event where they could meet the design team, see drawings of the planned works and ask questions. This was great, but most people don't always have the time to attend one-off events and we tried to bridge that gap with marketing tools such as local newsletters, advertising, newspaper articles, radio interviews and more.

It hasn't always been easy to communicate with the residents and there wasn't an endless budget to do it either. Sometimes we would set up events to speak to the public and only a handful of people would show up, or we would put out a positive media story only for the press to find a funding angle and turn it into a negative political news story! It wasn't plain sailing on the project, but we knew that would be

Lost O - Brad Downey: Long Weight



Lost O - Michael Pinsky: Lost O

the case, as this wasn't an ordinary road scheme. The team knew that they had tried 100% within their skills and budgets to do the best job they could in communicating with all stakeholders, and for the most part this was successful.

Local knowledge – a valuable tool

What really helped the project was that we were a local company. The knowledge that we already had for the area of Ashford, allowed us to react, prepare and understand the project and the media far more easily than a company who normally operated from outside Kent. We knew the press and already had established relationships. We were also able to keep up to date with local topics and matters that were close to the community, to help us deliver a valuable service of communication that was going to help the public to interact with and understand the project.

One key media campaign, which would only have happened through being local, was a history feature about one of the streets undergoing change. Bank Street had a particular history as it leads from the town centre to the site of the old cattle market. This campaign resulted in a six week history feature in the largest local paper, appealing for memories of the street, (which included memories of Elton John!), and resulted in an exhibition at Ashford's museum and a drinks reception for traders of the new Bank Street when it reopened.

We also worked with a national communications agency, Theresa Simon Associates, who had their own set of strong contacts within the construction and arts press. We were both able to dovetail with each other's skills for a good coverage of communications, both locally and nationally across a wide range of groups.

Glass half empty

The biggest challenge the communications team had throughout this project was the major local newspaper who were inclined to report more negative than positive angles throughout the project. Probably due to the difficult national financial situation at the time there was an underlying agenda to find out what the Councils were spending their funds on, and this scheme was at the top of the list. As Ashford was taking bold steps into shared space it was bound to have a certain amount of hesitation and worry about what the final result may be. This made it quite difficult to get our message out when we really needed to, and damaged some of the relations the team had been working hard to build up with the local community.

It didn't help that we were entering a recession, so money that was being spent on the scheme was under the spotlight even though it was all secured, mainly from national agencies, many months, and in some cases, years before anyone had heard the words 'credit crunch.'

The rebuttal of such questions about 'value for money' had to lie with the scheme proving itself, which took time and patience from the communications team! It is just turning the corner on the media side, with great reports showing that there are no recorded accidents to date, that the scheme is winning prestigious awards and that several councils are looking to Ashford as a blueprint for their own town plans for shared space.



Shared Space DVD – a national debate

One of our biggest challenges was trying to get the shared space philosophy understood by thousands of Ashford and Kent residents. With each person absorbing information in different ways, our team decided that a free DVD suitable for a large majority

of the target markets could be the solution. A well known Kent presenter was employed to explain exactly what shared space is on the DVD, and address key concerns that had been fed back by the public in our consultations, such as how to use the new ‘puffin’ pedestrian crossings.

The DVD started in Seven Dials, in Covent Garden, to show the viewers a recognisable example of how traffic, space and pedestrians can exist safely and functionally. The DVD then went on to include comments from the local people of Ashford, such as their disability group Ashford Access, local retailers and interviews with key people, such as Richard Stubbings; the scheme’s Champion and Ben Hamilton-Baillie, an urban design and movement specialist.

What we didn’t expect, was for it to make headline news. The cost of the DVD, was one of the stories that suddenly took on a political angle and made national news (sold by the same media contact locally) in Private Eye, The Daily Telegraph, The Sun and on the BBC One Show. The end result of this was that suddenly people were talking about the scheme and learning about what Ashford was doing – it certainly put it on the map! Thousands of DVDs flew off the shelves of local libraries, coffee shops and Council gateway offices. We managed to get our message out to a wider audience than we thought possible, so a negative story turned into a positive benefit.

Jeremy Clarkson also wrote about the project in the Sun newspaper and predicted that ‘millions would be dead’ from such a crazy shared space scheme. Contrary to his expectations we have been able to report that the scheme has shown no personal injury accidents in its first six months, and is proving to deliver exactly what it has promised and more.

What could have been improved?

Ashford’s changeover to shared space, was the largest of its kind in the UK at the time. Therefore, a lot of learning was going to be done along the way. So there are definitely areas that could have been improved, for those embarking on such a project.

From a communications angle it is imperative to have a strategy in place to speak to the community. This can be via local exhibitions in the street, where models can be seen, but more importantly, where the project team can be met and questions from the public can be answered. Maybe a regular event diarised throughout the project could have been a real benefit, for instance, a bi-monthly open house at a local venue, where the public could attend and speak to the project team and look at new images. This would provide another opportunity for the press to speak to some residents who are against the change, but this cannot be avoided throughout projects such as these. The benefits of engaging so regularly with the community would long-term outweigh any negative stories that the press may get as a result.

It is important to form a strong relationship with the press and to keep them up to date as soon as possible. They need to be included from the outset and the project needs to be ‘up front’ about costs, and why things may cost what they do, to explain why particular decisions have been made and to explain what the options were for the team when making such a decision. We also need to be prepared for the press to ‘dig’ into this information and sensationalise it for a great front cover story. It can often be misrepresented if the information isn’t given soon enough. In particular one of the local newspapers printed a front cover that Simeon Nelson’s ‘Flume’ pavement artwork cost £1 million, when actually, it was a tenth of that cost!

Involving as many interest groups in the project that you can manage is also valuable. They will become important ambassadors of the scheme and these could range from community groups, disability groups, artists and colleges – the area belongs to them after all.

Being brave about why you are making certain decisions on the project is crucial, and having as many supportive Council officers ready to back these up in the press if you are under fire. Money spent on your communications is justified and will never be a waste – people have to know what is happening in their area.

This project had a Contact Centre that was available at all hours of the day and if there were any questions that could not be answered, then the Project Manager would be contacted by the Contact Centre and given the details to respond. The fact that the Project Manager was available, approachable and not someone hidden in a back office, has been crucial to this project and showed Ashford that there is someone to question, praise and argue with!

Making the information as simple as possible will help people to understand. Artist’s impressions look pretty but are not always easy to interpret. The project had a large scale model of the whole Master Plan for Ashford which made it very easy for anyone to follow.

Finally, we have loved Ashford’s shared space from the outset, from the ‘rain gardens’ to the iconic lighting and quality granite paving. You have to have the passion to do your job well in communications, and all of the team has to believe in the final result of what you are trying to achieve.

Mummy, where's
the Ring Road
gone?



OW