

Bonn Square, Oxford.

The project was the winner of an open RIBA International competition held in 2005 and was completed in November 2008. It transforms a series of fragmented and undervalued land parcels into a hugely successful civic space in the heart of Oxford.

Submitted by Graeme Massie
Output No. 1



OUTPUT

Narrative

Bonn Square is a new public space located in the centre of Oxford which reconciles the conflicting demands of various public and private stakeholders while developing an architectural quality which is inherently modern yet sits comfortably within a revered historic context. It is an exemplar of a public space which employs apparently simple techniques to achieve a radical result, creating a space which draws significant numbers of visitors. The space operates successfully both as an informal backdrop to the daily life of the city and as a space for civic and informal events. The project has been the subject of many professional journal reviews and articles as well as appearing in the local and national press.. It was the winner of an RIBA open international competition and has also been the recipient of many awards, including the Royal Scottish Academy Medal for Architecture and the Scottish Design Awards Landscape Award

Question

How can a meaningful public space be formed from the conflicting demands of multiple stakeholders, conservation legislation and contemporary public space usage? Can a series of fragmented land parcels which are a setting for anti-social behaviour be transformed into a coherent, safe and fully accessible public space?

Title

Bonn Square, Oxford

Submission No.

01

Authors/Creators

Graeme Massie Architects



Image one & a description of what we are looking at in the context of the project.

CONTEXT

Context

After a lengthy period of neglect we have recently seen a renewed focus on the public realm, and with that a greater understanding of its vital importance to the social and economic life of communities. Within the context of this *urban renaissance* new public spaces have been created or redeveloped in many cities throughout the western world either as a means of signifying regeneration or to act as catalysts for regeneration. However, in many instances the desire to regenerate has led to the creation of spaces which have adopted a tabula rasa approach, with no tangible connections either to the past history of the specific site or indeed the wider area – they have no sense of place. Our project at Bonn Square clearly illustrates how a new public space can have both a sense of place and an uncompromising, contemporary design sensibility.

Oxford is a unique place, with a strong identity based principally on its historic university colleges. With the quadrangles of these colleges providing open space for the students and staff, the city centre has developed in a manner such that public space is minimal. Although formed in piecemeal fashion, Bonn Square, therefore, is an anomaly.



The numerous university colleges provide open space for students and staff.

General Description

Formerly composed of a number of autonomous land parcels, held under separate ownership, Bonn Square had neither a distinctive character nor a clear civic role and consequently gained a reputation for neglect and petty crime.

In its previous form Bonn Square encompassed a landscaped memorial garden for the Grade II listed Tirah Memorial, the forecourt to the Grade II listed New Road Baptist Church, and the public highways of New Road / Queen Street, to the south, and New Inn Hall Street, to the east. The location is a hub for heavy pedestrian flows during the day and in the evening but its present layout, lack of natural surveillance and degraded appearance had made it a focus for some of the worst criminal and anti-social behaviour in the city centre.



A fragmented and under-valued series of land parcels in multiple ownership.



Historic context of central Oxford with highly articulated architecture in stone.



The effects of time on the stone surfaces.

The nearby university colleges are principally constructed from locally sourced limestone connecting the architecture to the local geology. The limestone construction gives both the colleges and Oxford a powerful identity and sense of place.

The true beauty of the stone is further enhanced by the passing of time. The limestone used is a relatively soft stone allowing wind, rain and frost to gradually erode previously smooth surfaces, leaving richly textured traces of the original geology as a contrasting overlay on the highly refined and sophisticated architecture of the past.

METHODOLOGY

Methodology

In many ways the initial stages in the design process for the development of Bonn Square was untypical. As an open design competition there was to be no contact with the client (usually the starting point for a new project); however there was a clear and precise written brief which, as well as providing background information, topographic and photographic surveys and budget, set out the aims and objectives of the project.

Being located right in the heart of Oxford, as well as being publicly funded (the client was Oxford City Council) led to a brief which tried to balance the requirements and desires of a large number of local stakeholders. In doing so, it became essential at the competition stage to be able to decipher the extended list of requirements and distil this down into a clear hierarchy of ambitions – not necessarily leading to the same list

of aims and objectives highlighted in the brief.

With the brief distilled down to a short list of requirements, design options were developed and assessed through various forms of media: sketches, 2d computer drawings and 3d computer models.

Only after a preferred solution was beginning to take form was it decided to undertake a site visit. This allowed the site visit to be more than a process for undertaking analysis and recording – it became a valuable tool to assess decisions taken to date, allowing one to stand on site and imagine the space as proposed. The visit affirmed most of the significant decisions taken but also opened our eyes to further possibilities at a detailed level.



Image from the competition submission

General Description

The project is for a new public space in the heart of Oxford and within the Central (City and University) Conservation Area. Within this historic context there is little contemporary architecture, and indeed the square itself contains a number of listed buildings and structures.

The layout and function of the square has changed over time, with each phase leaving its mark on the present day character and appearance of the square. The square has its origins in Anglo-Saxon/medieval times and has been subject to development and change ever since. As such, the square is intrinsically part of the history of Oxford .

Although the square is formed from a number of land parcels in different ownership, Oxford City Council undertook to develop the square as a whole, subject to the final agreement of all land owners. Representatives of all land owners sat on the competition jury to select a winning proposal and as such guaranteed the delivery of the project (fully funded by Oxford City Council) upon the event of a unanimous decision.

The councils' vision for the square was for it to become a 'dynamic, inspirational city square which people will love and use at the hub of the revitalised west end of the city centre.'



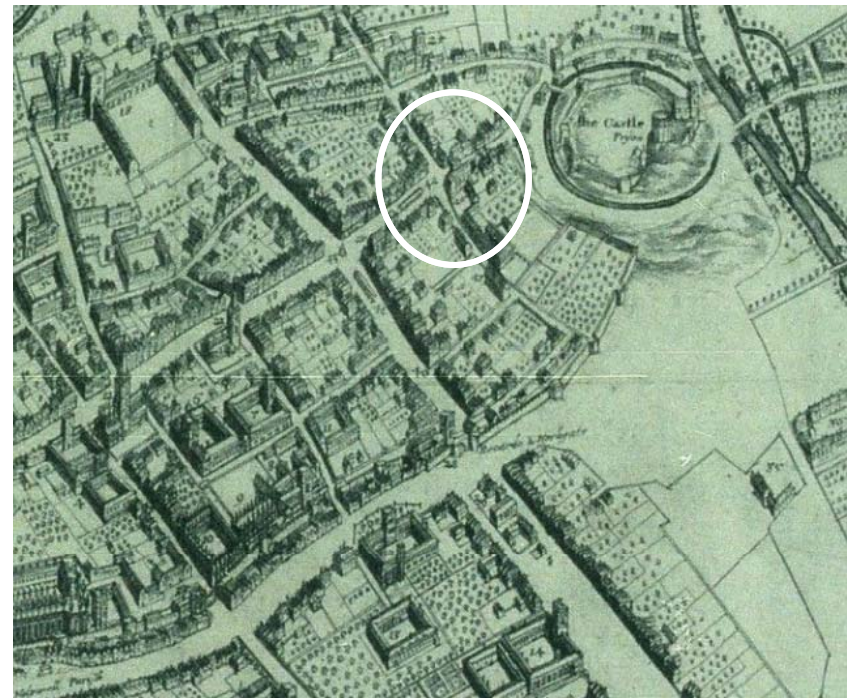
View of New Road Baptist Church and Tirah Memorial prior to redevelopment.

Context and Research Methods

Both the specific historic and physical context of the square itself and the wider historic context of Oxford were studied in order to firmly locate the new square in the social and cultural context of the city.

The origins of the present 'Bonn Square', a name first devised in 1974 to celebrate links between Oxford and the German city of Bonn, are to be found in the Anglo-Saxon period. Here we find a sizable settlement laid out on a grid plan. The configuration of the routes now called New Inn Hall Street, Queen Street and Castle Street remain unchanged and establish the basic spatial pattern of the site.

In the 11th century Bonn Square was the site of the church of St Peter-le-Bailey, one of the original city gate Churches. This collapsed in 1726 and was not rebuilt. A new church was erected on the same footprint in 1728, but was demolished in 1874 to accommodate the construction of New Road. The archaeological remains of this Georgian church and its cemetery (and possibly the remains of the earlier medieval church) remain in-situ beneath the highway and the Tirah Memorial Garden, and continue to exert a remarkable physical presence within the site.



Bonn Square located on 1643 Map of Oxford



*Bonn Square prior to redevelopment.
The space did not encourage public use.*

Site Analysis: Existing Condition

Bonn Square lies at the heart of the central retail district, and is addressed by many commercial properties, including the Westgate Shopping Centre. Consequently the two principal routes through the square, namely New Inn Hall Street and Queen Street, are heavily trafficked by pedestrians, bicyclists and buses. Prior to redevelopment this busy streetscape was further congested by street furniture, kiosks and bicycle racks which appear to have been positioned without a coherent strategy. In spite of the proliferation of other forms of street furniture there was an under-provision of seating, prohibiting users from lingering in the space.

The construction of New Road reduced the extent of what was a garden in front of the New Road Baptist Church leaving a paved area bounded by a wall and railings.

The ambiguous identity of Bonn Square, mostly due to its piecemeal creation: is exacerbated by a proliferation of ground surfaces, street furniture and kiosks. These factors led to unclear distinctions between the public and semi-public space within the square and limited its permeability, both visually and physically. Consequently, many of the public routes through the site were not immediately apparent. The only obvious routes through the site were along New Inn Hall Street and Queen Street. The changes in level and uneven surfaces of the other routes further restricted access.

The square lacked the infrastructure to accommodate different functions. Insufficient provision of seating and lighting throughout the square inhibit typical everyday activities; consequently, Bonn Square did not fulfill the range of uses typical of successful public spaces.

In purely visual terms one might have expected the raised area of the former churchyard to provide some respite from the surrounding activity, with the monument at its centre and fringed by established trees. However this space was poorly maintained and had gained a reputation for significant antisocial and criminal behaviour).

Despite its significance within the city, the condition and treatment of Bonn Square was such that the first impression for most people was that it held limited interest. As such it was not valued by the local community or visitors and as a public space was abused or misused.

Prior to redevelopment, Bonn Square had neither a clear identity nor a defined civic role within the city.

Aims and Objectives

While the immediate context of the existing Bonn Square was perhaps underwhelming (although still containing a number of listed buildings and structures), the wider architectural context of the city became a continual source of inspiration during the development of the project. The many university colleges within the city centre each have their own strategies for dealing with public and semi-public space and their interface with the city. These spaces vary from the intimate to the expansive, but in all instances there is an undeniably powerful atmosphere – perhaps related to their great histories but also in part due to their homogeneity and the nature and presence of stone.

With this in mind our initial thoughts on Bonn Square related to how to transform a heterogeneous space into a homogeneous space which would somehow convey a character and atmosphere which was particular to Oxford.

The biggest challenge here was to find a way to make a space which existed on a number of different levels into a space perceived as one.

As described earlier the problem was one of archaeology; over years a number of churches have existed in and around the site, and as well as the presence of remnants of their architecture was the presence of the associated graveyards. The strategy for dealing with archaeological remains is clearly stated in policy to favour in-situ preservation over removal. With the presence of remains near to the surface of the existing memorial garden we were faced with developing a strategy to accommodate their retention. We concluded that a balance would be required between the desire to create a homogeneous space and the requirement to minimise removal of archaeological remains. The final solution proposed shaving the top layer off the raised area in order to create a tilted plane which would also provide full access to buildings to the north of the site.



*Section through site, at competition stage,
showing tilted plane to retain archaeological
remains and provide access to buildings to the
north of the site.*

In general, the practice tends to be informed by much work from the Scandinavian countries. Here, architects such as Sigurd Lewerentz, Alvar Aalto and Jorn Utzon developed a form of modernism which was more particular in its response to place and climate, and often had a strong connection with the wider landscape and natural environment. In addition much of the Scandinavian architecture we admire displays a strong interest in the craft of architecture – how materials go together – often to the extent that many of the architects are also involved in the development of products and systems for use in their buildings.

In considering the material qualities of Bonn Square, and their effect on character and atmosphere, we researched both contemporary and historic examples of public space, and again it was Scandinavia where we found precedents which were of the most interest.

In general the quality of public space in Scandinavian countries is particularly high. In addition to the main public spaces, which one would expect to be well maintained and of a high quality, even smaller neighbourhood spaces are of an astonishingly high standard – both in terms of design and craftsmanship. Building on the traditions of these Scandinavian public spaces, Kalmar Stortorget by Caruso St John (1999 - 2003) demonstrates to us quite clearly how the subtle manipulation of surface can radically impact on the atmosphere of a city square.

At Bonn Square our original intention was to use a locally sourced limestone as the base material for the surface of the square. To determine the suitability of the stone for its purpose, a large number of laboratory tests were independently carried out. In this instance the limestone failed the test for slip resistance of large vehicles (while there was a long term plan to remove all buses from Queen Street, there was a need for them to continue for a number of years). Subsequently we used a sandstone, with a similar colouration, to achieve the desired effect – a material dialogue with the built fabric of Oxford.

In selecting stone setts to form the surface, in collaboration with the artist Jacqueline Poncelet, we developed a range of patterns for the laying of the stones (including the introduction of Caithness Setts to form implied shadows), based on the relationships between sawn and split-face elements. The differing stone patterns were then used to demarcate historic and current ownership boundaries, thereby providing a subtle trace of the sites past.

To compliment the stone surface, and its ability to wear gracefully, we designed a range of street furniture, including benches, litter bins, signage and lighting columns – all to be formed in bronze. Bronze was selected both for its ability to wear well and also as over time it will patinate and gradually stain the stone surface – a further visible manifestation of the passing of time. Similarly, the species of tree – Robinia Psuedoacacia – was selected for its seasonal variation and connection with the university colleges (it is often found within their gardens and quadrangles).

Conclusion

Bonn Square is a modest public space which acts as a focus for the revitalised wet end of Oxford. Although small, in comparison to many city squares, it nonetheless manages to successfully be both civic and informal in its character, as well as being very much of its place. It is an exemplar of how public spaces can be created from unpromising conditions, to somehow reflect and intensify the atmosphere of a given place. The project's success and impact can be judged by its sustained public usage since its completion and a lack of misuse and vandalism which was associated with its previous existence. Within professional architecture and landscape architecture disciplines, it has received national and international awards and significant publication exposure.

DISSEMINATION

Dissemination

Professional Journals

Bonn Square, Architect's Journal 05.11.09 vol.230 no. 16 pp 20-27.

Portfolio: Graeme Massie Architects, Blueprint no.244 July 2006 pp 26-27

Public Exhibitions

Bonn Square, Modern Art Oxford, 9-19 June 2005

Royal Scottish Academy, Annual Exhibition, 2005

Recent Work: Graeme Massie Architects, RIAS, 4 May – 2 June 2006

Impact

Awards

2005, Winner, RIBA International Competition

2005, Winner, Royal Scottish Academy Gold Medal for Architecture

2009, Commendation, Architectural Review Emerging Architecture Awards

2009, Commendation, Oxford Preservation Trust Environmental Awards

2010, Winner, Landscape Award, Scottish Design Awards



ILLUSTRATIONS

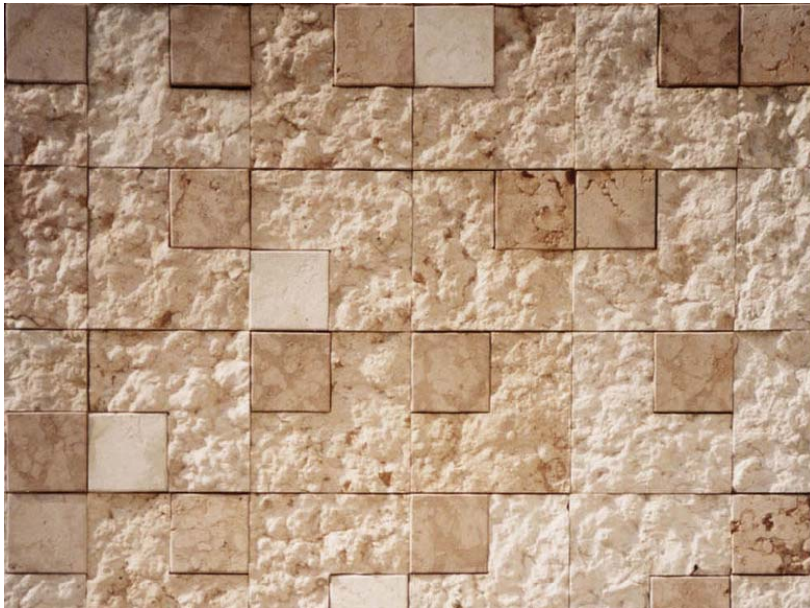
Reference Images



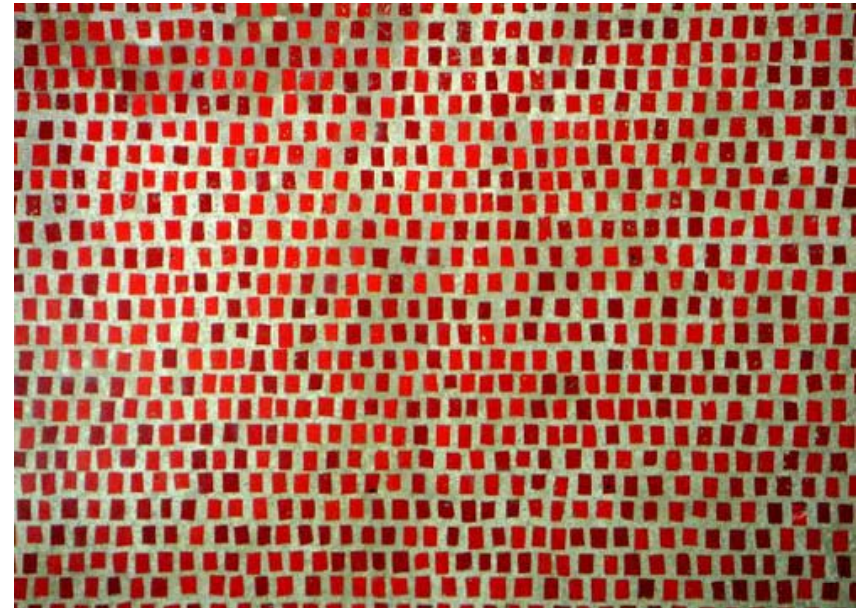
High quality public realm, Stockholm, Sweden.



*Richly textured stone surface.
Stortorget, Kalmar, Sweden.
Architect: Caruso St John, 1999 - 2003*



*Geometric arrangement of textured stone pieces.
Museo di Castelvecchio, Verona, Italy.
Architect: Carlo Scarpa*



*Loosely laid ceramics in a bed of mortar.
Olivetti Showroom, Venice, Italy.
Architect: Carlo Scarpa*

Design Development



*Proposed plan as submitted for the RIBA
International Competition*

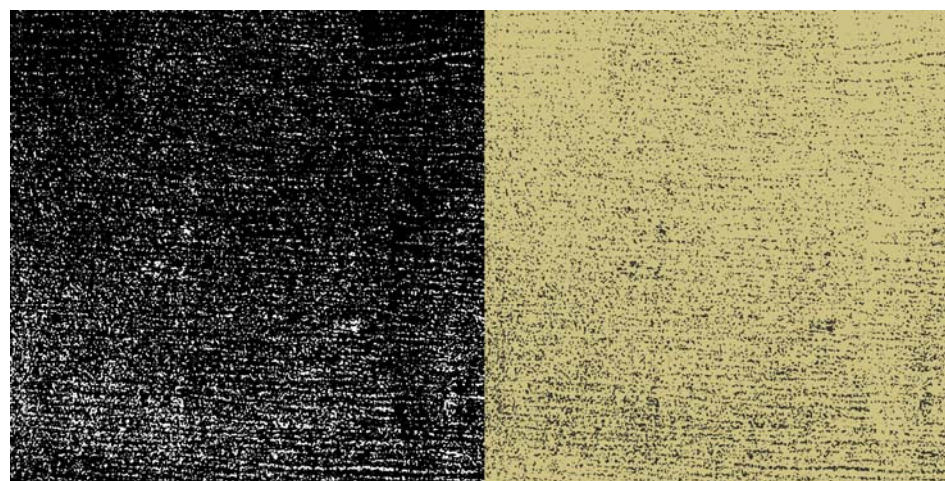


*Perspective view as submitted for the RIBA
International Competition*



Close-up photograph of Limestone

Grayscale - Pixelation

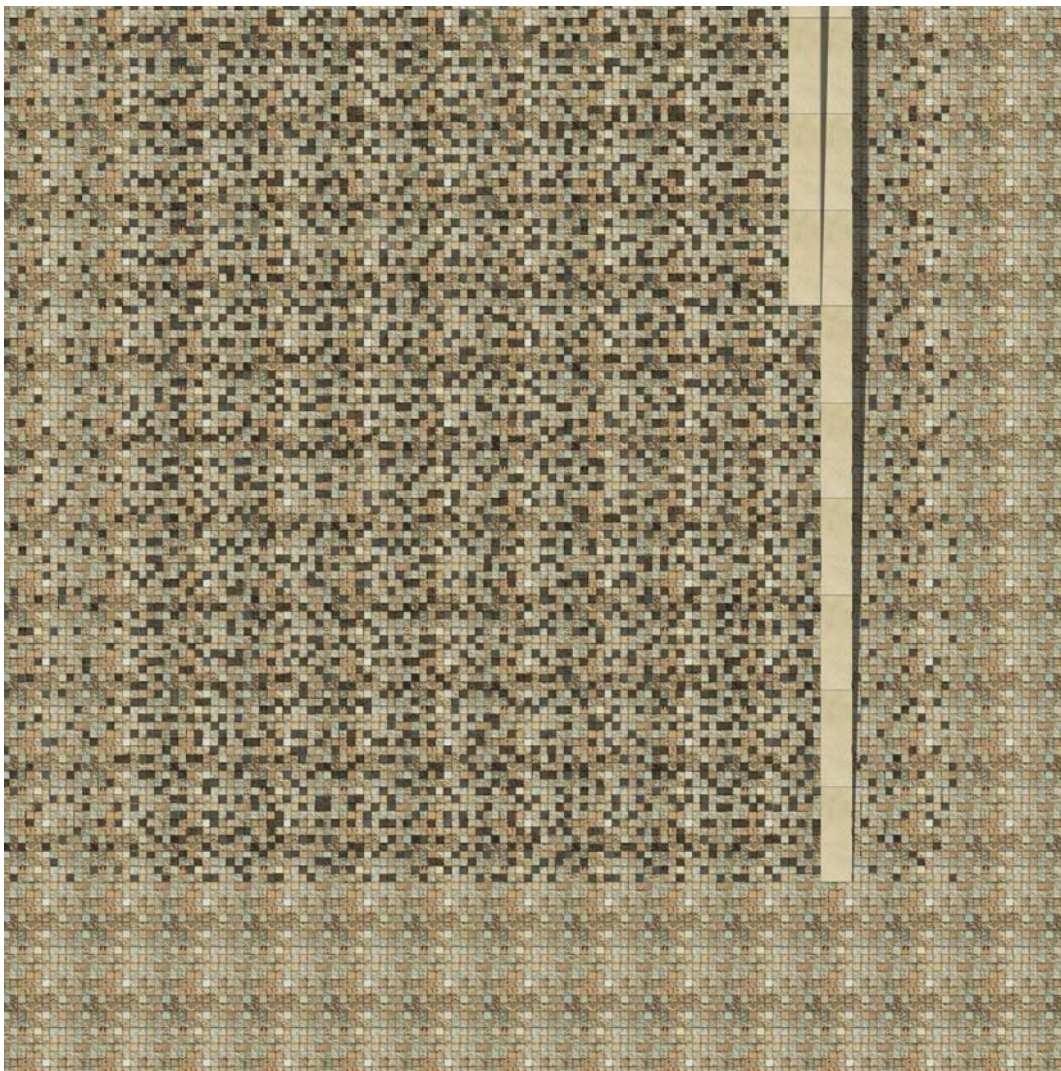


Full Contrast - Pixelation

enlarge scale to....

Bonn Square
combining limestones from Oxford and Bonn

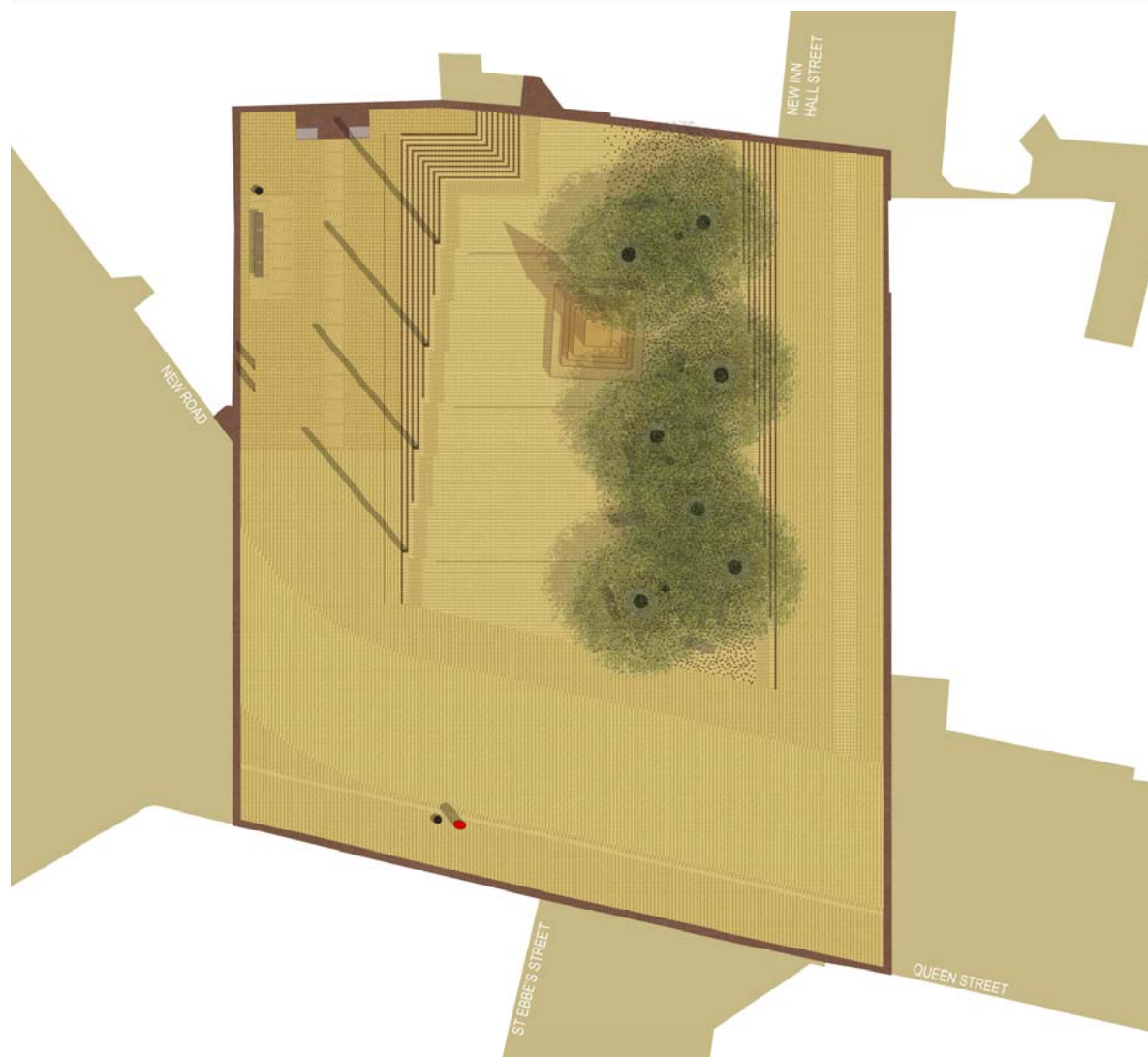
*Investigations into pixelation as a means of
generating surface*



Collaboration with the artist Jacqueline Poncelet led to the development of a variegated stone surface.

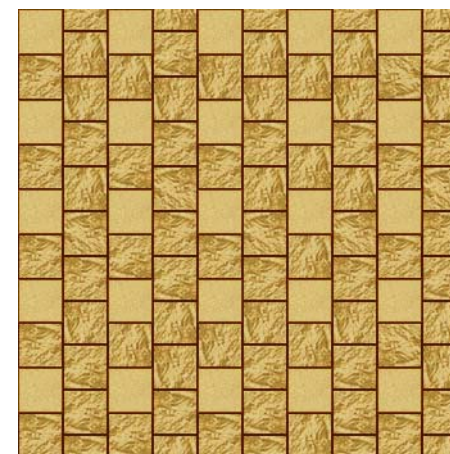
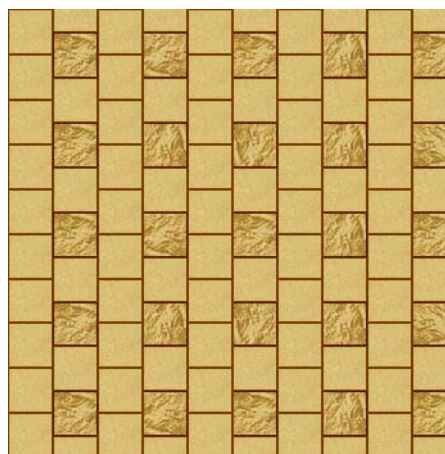
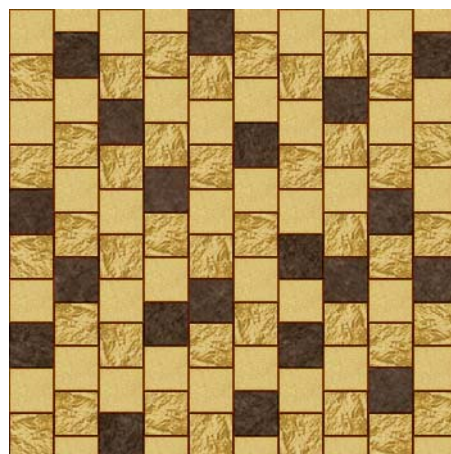
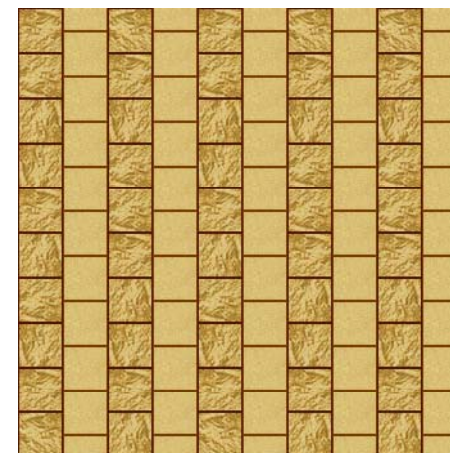
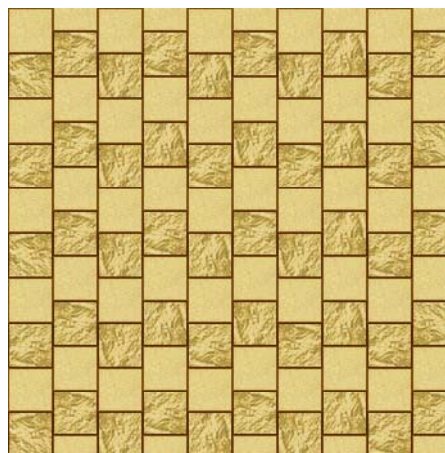


Location Plan



Site Plan, with final surface textures

Variations in surface texture used to define different areas of the site.

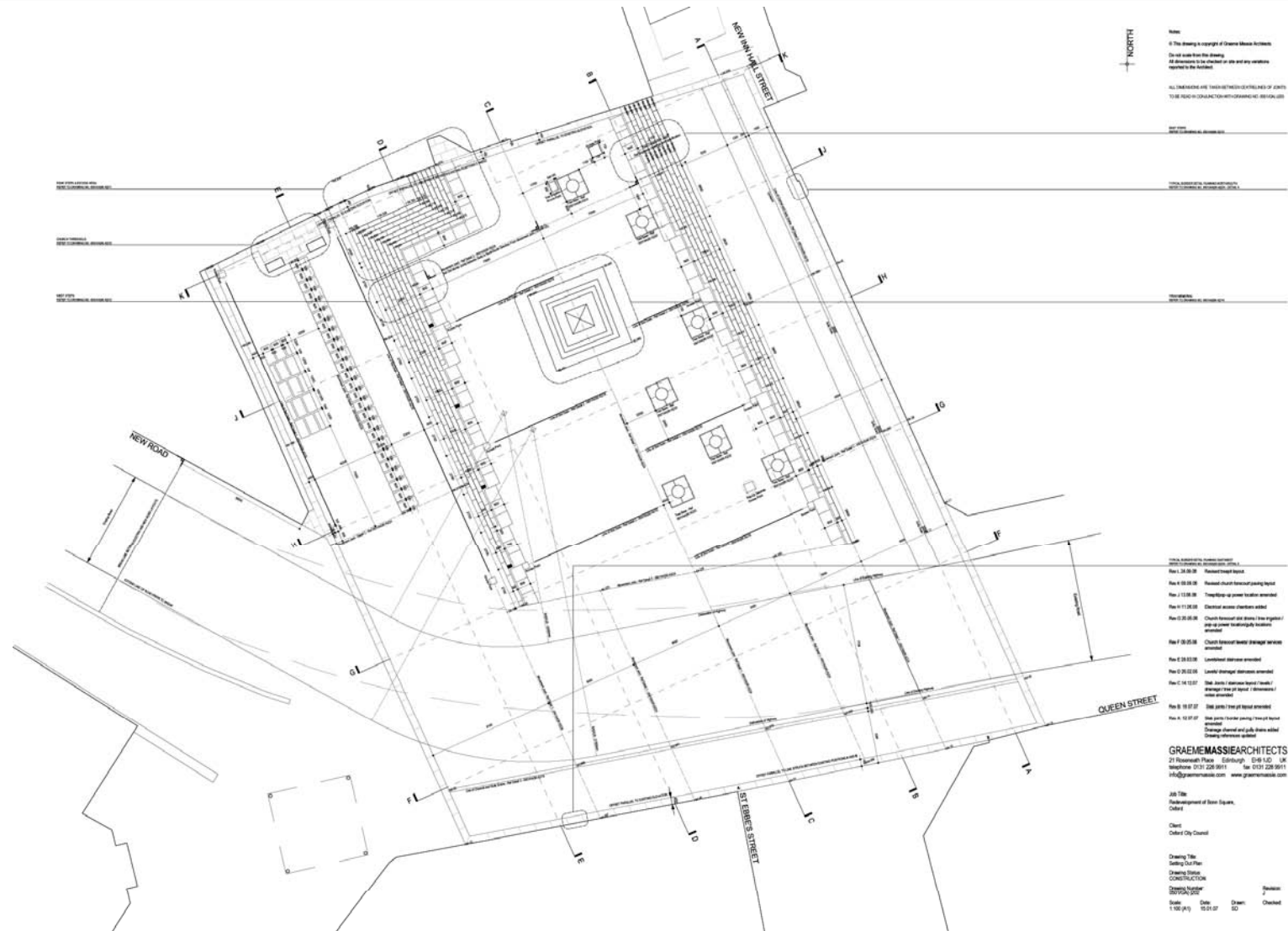




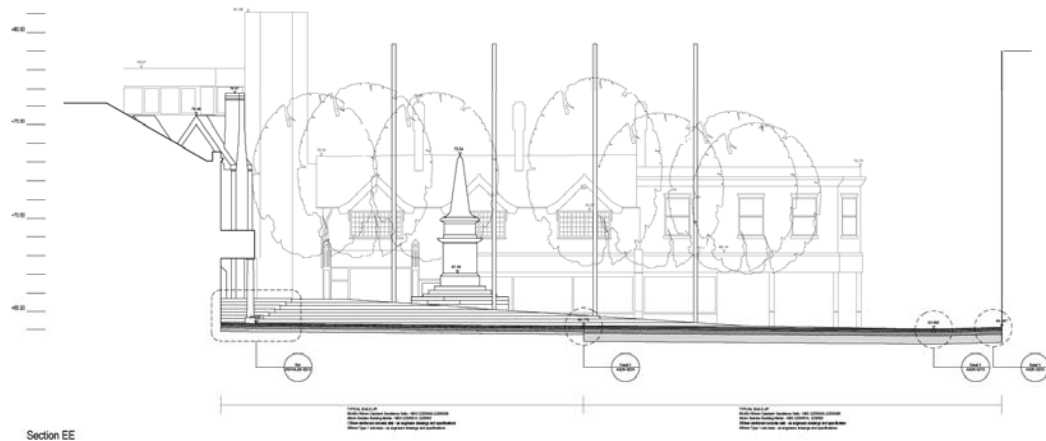
Physical model used to illustrate the proposal in context.



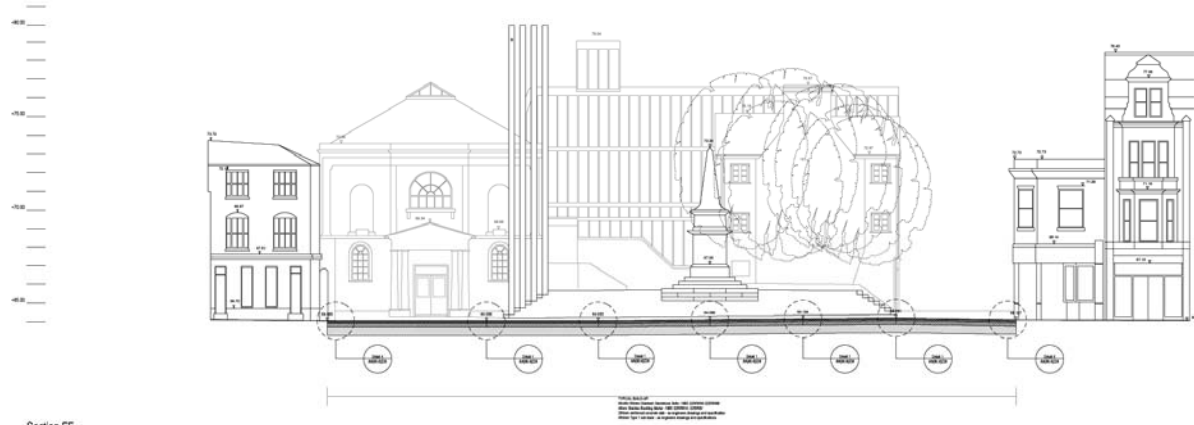
Material samples



Notes
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 3. All dimensions to be checked on site and any variations reported to the architect.



Section EE



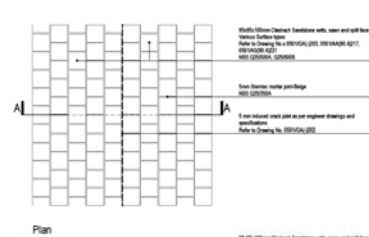
Section FF

Rev C 14/12/13 Layout, levels, plot and drainage amended
 Rev B 10/12/13 Measurement plot locations amended
 Rev A 10/12/13 Drainage channel added
 Drawing otherwise unaltered
GRAEME MASSIE ARCHITECTS
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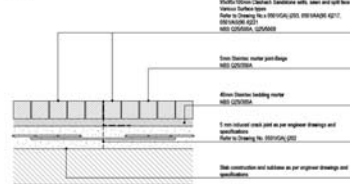
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 Client
 Oxford City Council

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 Date
 15/12/13
 Drawn
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 Checked
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 Revision
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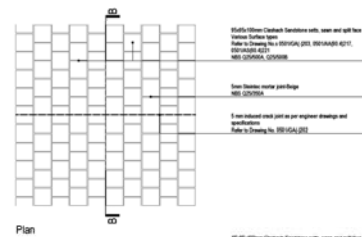




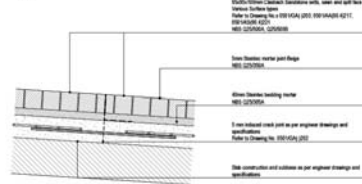
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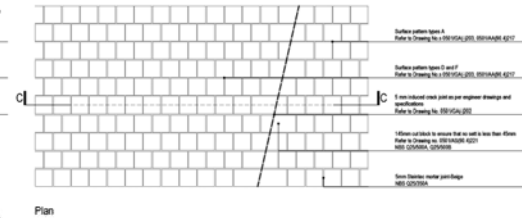
Section AA
Detail 1: Typical Movement Joint Detail Running North/South



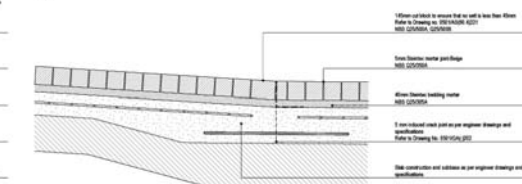
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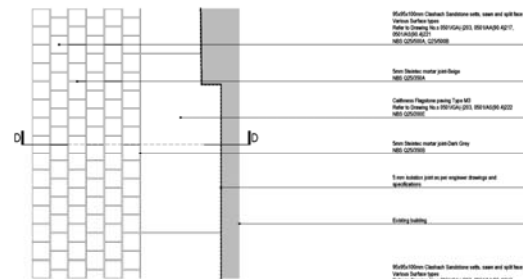
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Detail 2: Typical Movement Joint Detail Running East/West



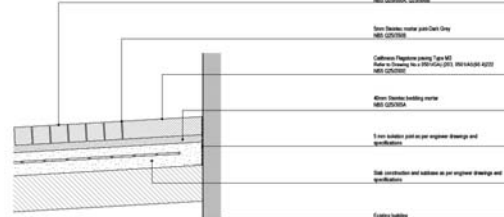
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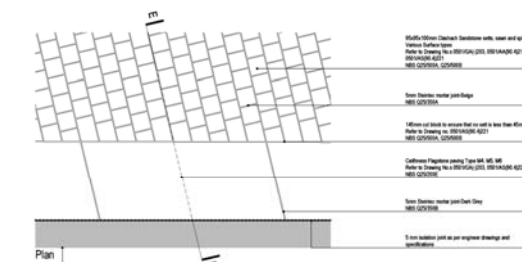
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Detail 3: Typical Diagonal Movement Joint Detail at Foot of Ramped Surface



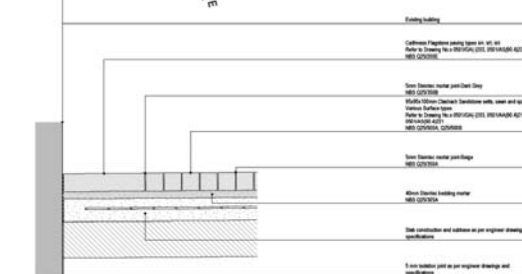
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Section DD
Detail 4: Typical Border Detail Running North / South



Plan



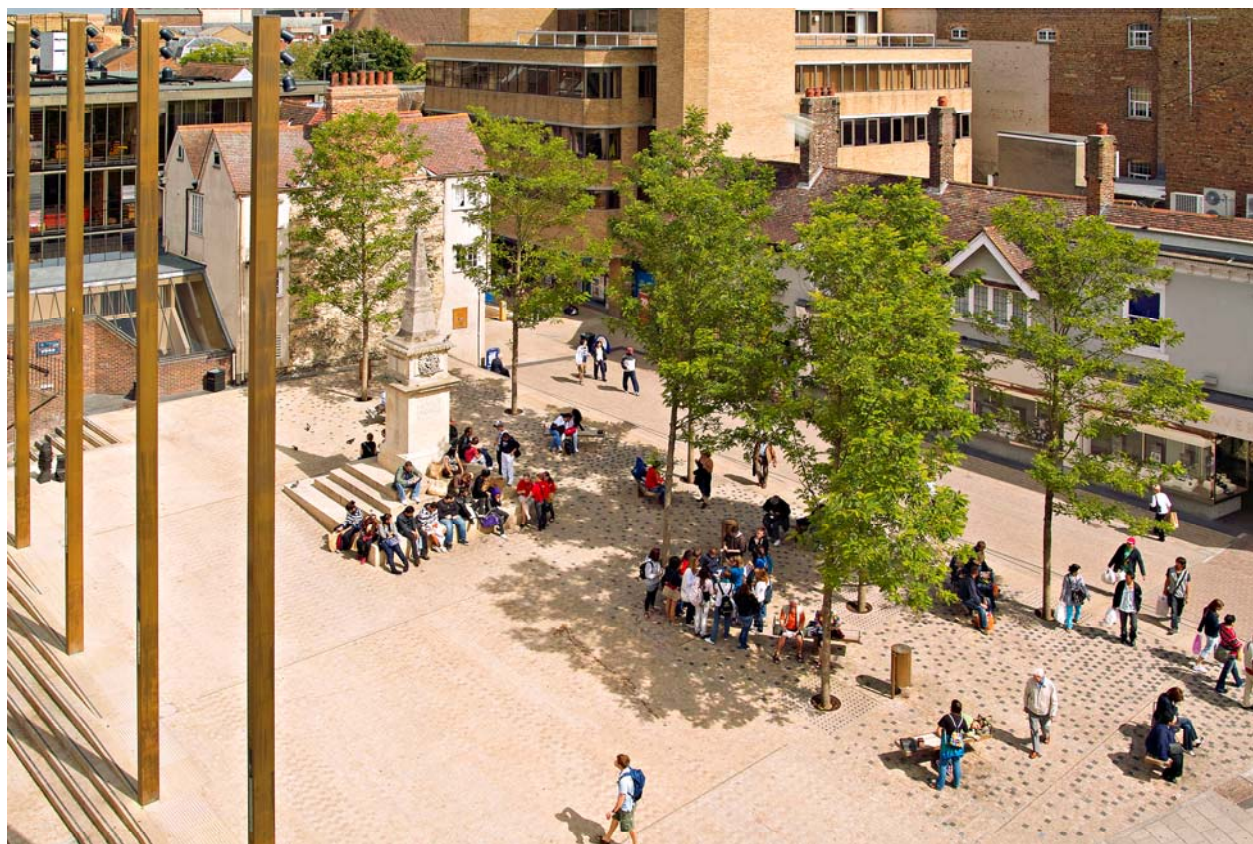
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Detail 5: Typical Border Detail Running East / West

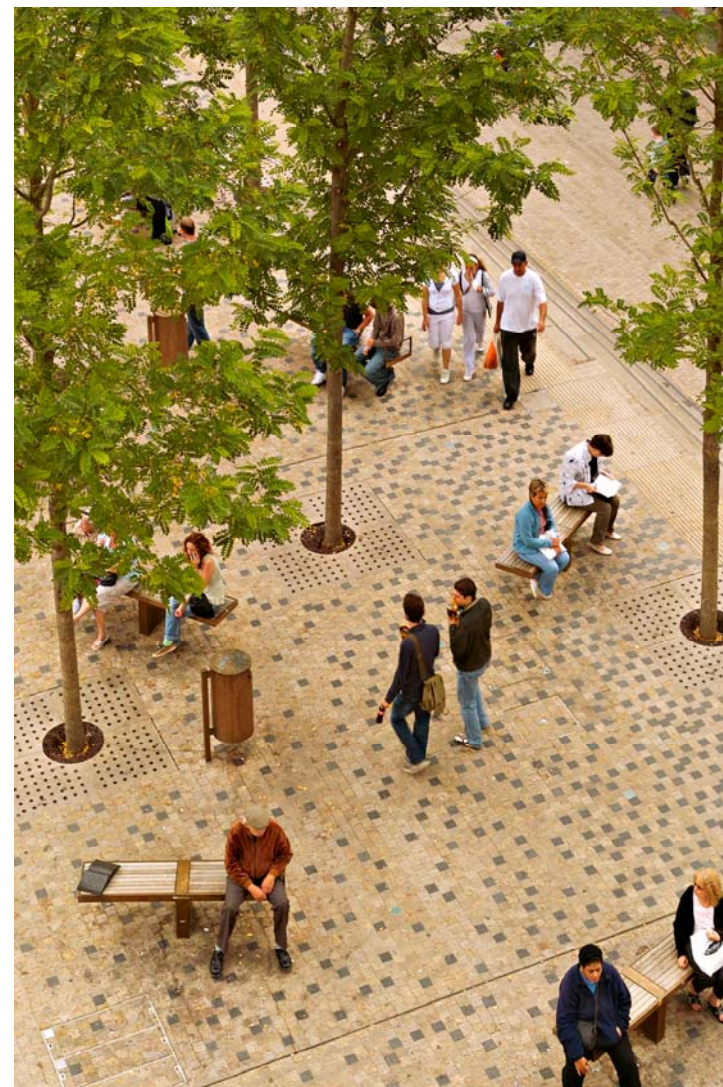
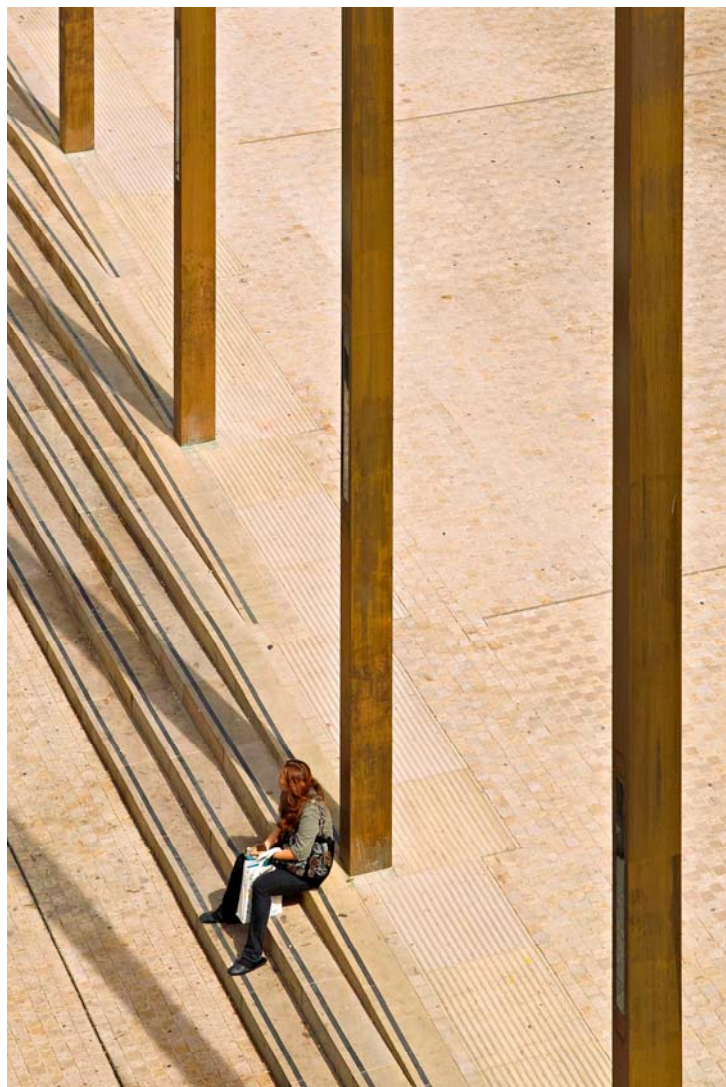
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4. All dimensions are given in millimetres unless otherwise stated.

Rev A 12.07.17 Notes amended
Rev B 08.01.17 Notes amended
Rev C 02.07.17 Notes and layout amended
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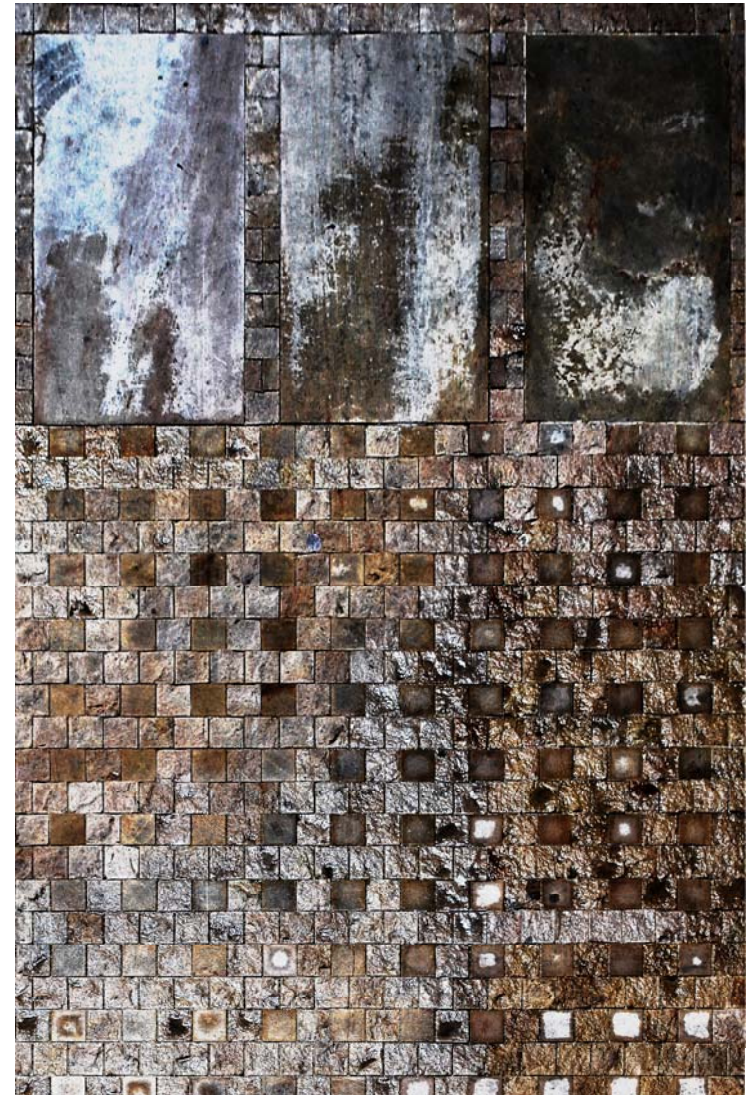
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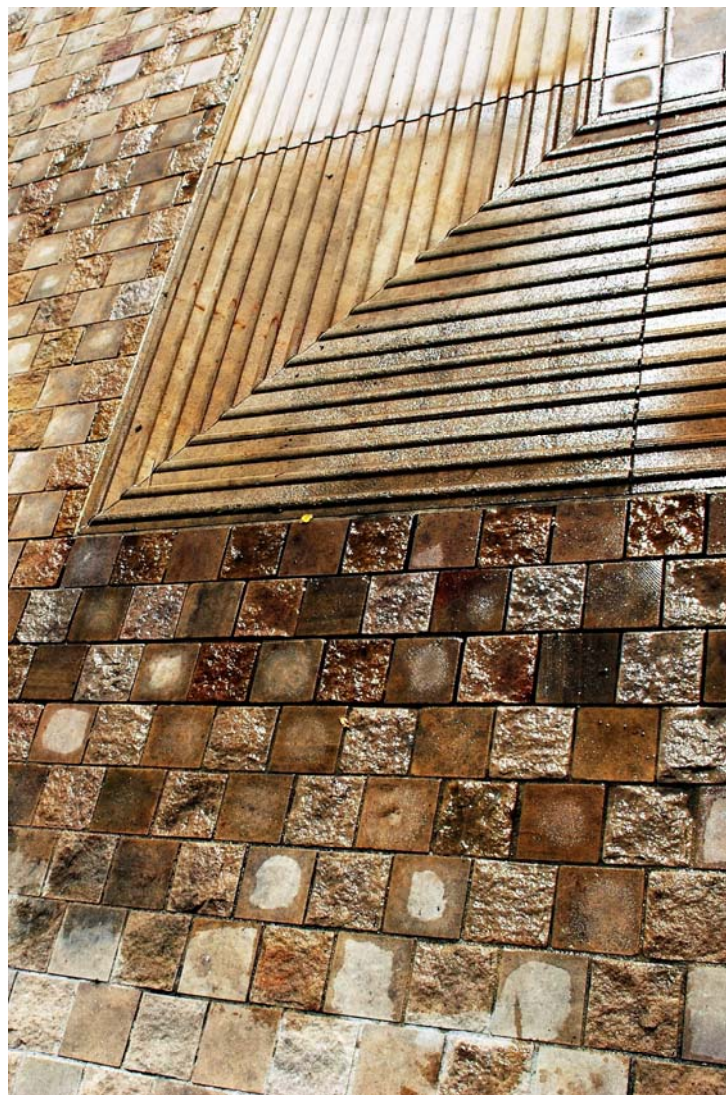
Completed Photographs

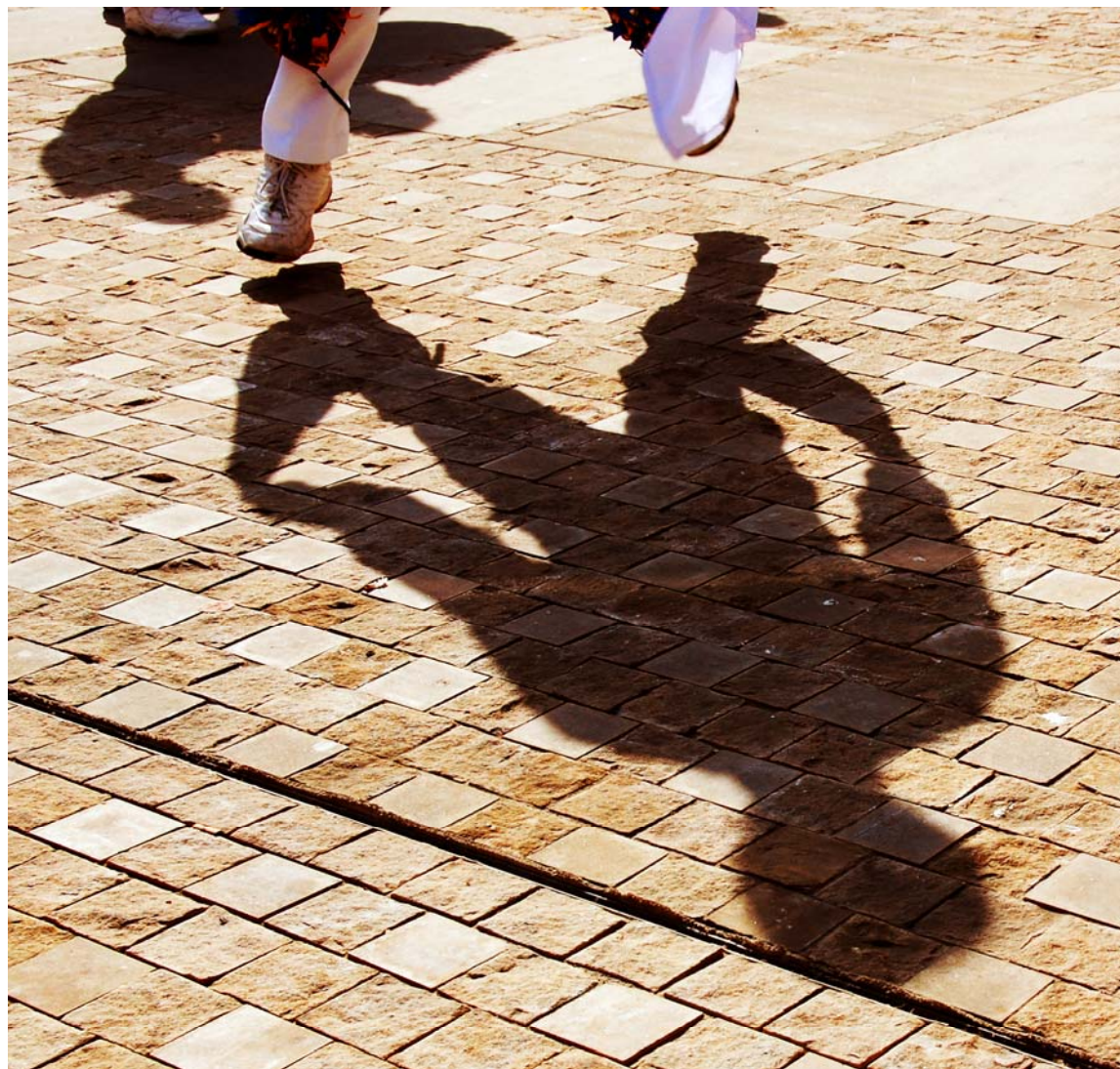
















Acknowledgements

Project Title: Bonn Square, Oxford

Client: Oxford City Council

Architect: Graeme Massie Architects

Engineers: Buro Happold

QS: Davis Langdon

Arts: Artpoint Trust

Contractor: English Landscape Ltd

Contract Sum: £1,500,000

Contract: JCT 2005 with Quantities

Completed: November 2008