

Bonn Square, Oxford, UK

Previous State

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. One of few public spaces in the city centre, Bonn Square lies at the convergence of four important shopping and commercial streets, and was named as such in 1974 to celebrate links between the cities of Oxford and Bonn. However, it had developed in an ad-hoc manner, encompassing the landscaped memorial garden (created at the end of the 19th century over a former graveyard) 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. Although a busy pedestrian hub during both day and evening, its previous layout, lack of natural surveillance and degraded appearance made it a focus for some of the worst criminal and anti-social behaviour in the city centre. Buses, taxis and delivery vehicles passed west to east along its southern side into Queen Street, further inhibiting people from enjoying the full potential of the square. The streetscape was further congested by street furniture, kiosks, bicycle racks, positioned without a coherent strategy. In spite of the proliferation of other forms of street furniture there was an under-provision of seating which discouraged users from lingering in the space. Despite its significance within the city, the condition and treatment of Bonn Square led to it being undervalued by the local community. Bonn Square had neither a clear identity nor a defined civic role.

Aim of the Intervention

Bonn Square desperately needed improvement in order to create a place that everyone in the city, whether residents, workers or tourists, would actively use and fully enjoy. As such, the transformation of Bonn Square into a high quality, contemporary city square was seen by Oxford City Council as one of the key projects in the regeneration of the west-end of the city centre. The council's vision for Bonn Square was for it to become a dynamic, inspirational city square; however in doing so it should also respect and enhance the history of the square and its historic setting. To be successful the project had to demonstrate a fusion of current public space requirements with the requirements of conservation legislation. Our proposals for the square reveal the latent potential of the site, its ideal location and historic associations, whilst proposing positive and realistic solutions to its problems. As the flagship project in the redevelopment of the Oxford's west end, and a keystone in the City Council's Area Action Plan, Bonn Square will act as a catalyst for further local regeneration and a wider programme of public realm initiatives throughout the city.

Description of the Intervention

In responding to that which is essential and of historic value and augmenting it with a series of discrete interventions the project is seen as a sympathetic, yet radical, reinterpretation of the Square. In its new form the square has become a flexible, events space which provides a venue for both formal and informal civic events, as well being a safe and accessible backdrop to the life of the city. The scheme is defined by four key components:

- a variegated sandstone surface unifies the Square's former component parcels and establishes a relationship with the material fabric of Oxford
- a central ramped area accommodates the extant archaeological remains of the St Peter-le-Bailey church, and its deconsecrated burial ground, whilst providing full access to all users
- a grove of Robinia Pseudoacacia trees - commonly found in the university college gardens - shades a loosely dispersed collection of bespoke phosphor bronze street furniture
- four 15 metre high phosphor bronze lighting columns act collectively as a landmark within the cityscape and facilitate the modification of the Square's character through light level and colour.

The combination of sawn and split-faced sandstone setts in different configurations creates multiple surface patterns that articulate both anticipated usage and historic land ownership boundaries. The use of tone, modulation and varying textures have led to an expressive surface, which over time will wear, providing a trace of peoples movements through the Square. Similarly utilising time as an element of design, phosphor bronze street furniture and light fittings will patinate and stain the sandstone surface while tree species have been selected for their seasonal variation.

Phase 1 was completed in November 2008.

Evaluation

Bonn Square is one of the few public spaces within central Oxford. It benefits from a location within the historic city centre and at the heart of the city's commercial district. In its previous form, the fragmentary spatial character, neglected appearance and reputation for criminal behaviour combined to create a space which had neither a clear identity nor a defined civic role and also excluded certain user groups. Key elements contributing to the success of the project include:

- reconfiguration of the existing ground levels has created a space that is accessible to all - circulation and visual permeability of the square has correspondingly been significantly improved, reducing the potential for anti-social behaviour
- listed structures in and around the square have been protected and their settings enhanced, as has the character of the Central Conservation Area
- the new sandstone surface has established a spatial clarity and a dialogue with the material fabric of Oxford
- phosphor bronze street furniture combines with the grove of trees to consolidate the identity of the square and provide the backdrop and infrastructure for both everyday and special events
- the ability of the space to act either as a backdrop to daily life or as a venue for civic events.

The redevelopment of Bonn Square demonstrates that contemporary design can meaningfully engage with historic context, without resort to pastiche or indeed to wilful contrast, and has created an important legacy for the city of Oxford. It is now a well-used and much appreciated asset for all residents and visitors to the city.