

# Towards a fine City for People

Public Spaces and Public Life - London 2004



## SUMMARY DOCUMENT

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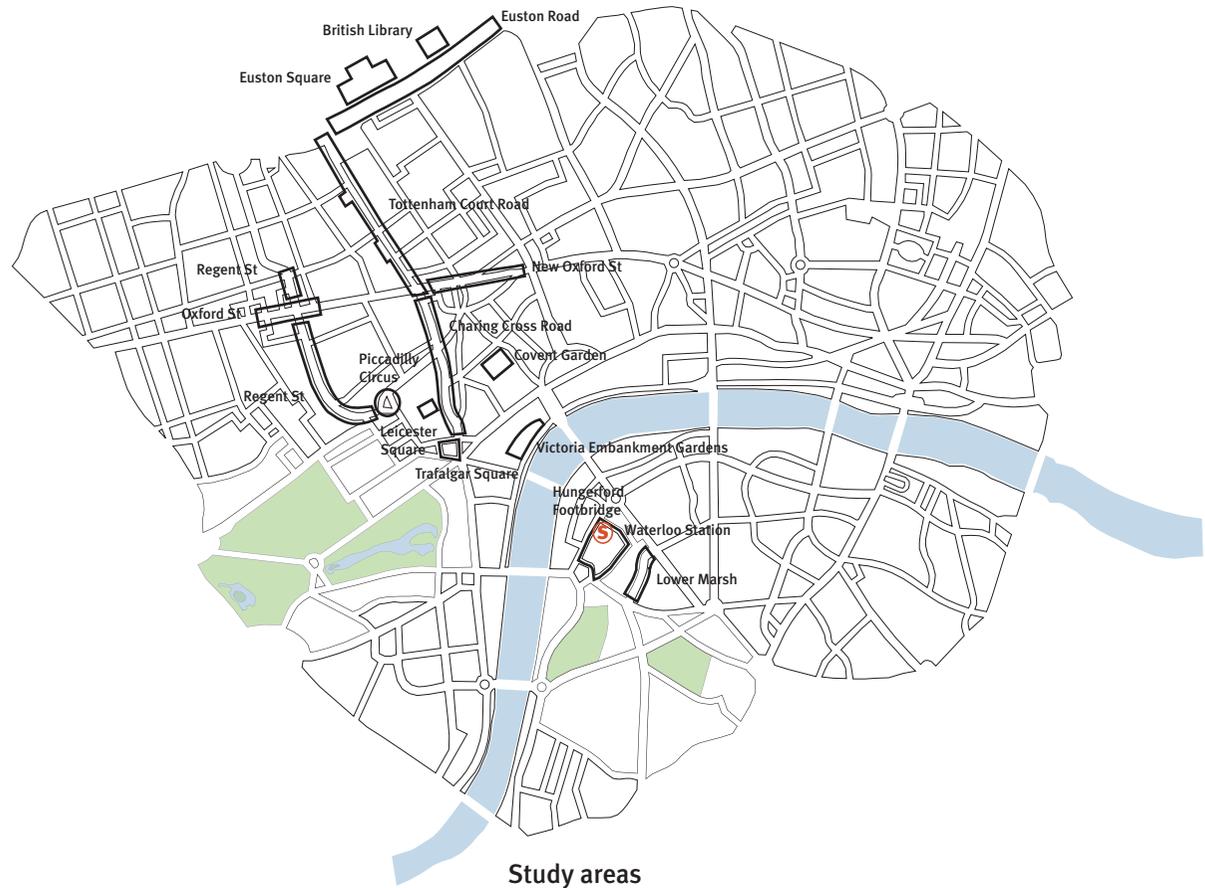
## Public Spaces and Public Life - London 2004

This is a summary document of the full report Towards a fine city for People.

This report sets out the findings, observations and recommendations of GEHL Architects' Public Spaces and Public Life study for London that was commissioned jointly by Transport for London (TfL) and Central London Partnership (CLP).

The study sought ways to upgrade public spaces and improve conditions for walking and public life in London based on detailed examination of conditions at specific locations in central London.

It has followed similar lines to previous studies conducted by GEHL Architects for other cities and therefore benefits from the experience of best practice from around the world.



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*This study has been undertaken by Gehl Architects acting as consultant on behalf of Transport for London and Central London Partnership acting as co-clients.*

*The views expressed and the recommendations set out in the report are those of the consultants and these do not necessarily reflect the views of the clients.*

London is a city with many positive assets that include world-class historic and modern architecture, beautiful parks and squares and grand streets. But against this backdrop many areas suffer from a domination of vehicular traffic whilst pedestrians and cyclists, as important users of the city, are often given low priority and inadequate facilities. Public Spaces and Public Life - London 2004 sets out to examine the state of selected traffic, pedestrian and cycling environments in more detail in order to find solutions to the current situation through building on the existing good features.

### **Public spaces - problems and potentials**

There are opportunities to improve the quality of public space in London and a series of problems to be overcome. Overall, the main findings and recommendations focus on several key areas for action to improve the current situation:

- ❶ creating a better balance between vehicular traffic, pedestrians and cyclists
- ❷ improving conditions for walking and cycling
- ❸ improving conditions for resting and simply passing time
- ❹ upgrading the visual quality of the streetscape
- ❺ promoting a shift in mind-sets towards a more people-orientated city culture

The success of the whole process relies on changing fundamentally how we think about movement in London.

### **The condition of pedestrian, traffic and cycling environments**

The city landscape has been considered from three perspectives; those of traffic, pedestrians and cyclists. Detailed examination of each is accompanied by a wide range of case studies of international good practice. These provide useful comparative data to support observations and recommendations for how to improve current conditions for all street users and walkers and cyclists in particular.

#### **The traffic environment**

The general trend of increased levels of vehicular traffic in Greater London has led to worsening conditions for pedestrians and cyclists despite improvements in central London as a result of the congestion charge. Furthermore, the streetscape is principally designed for the motor vehicle often to the exclusion of other types of user. For instance guard railing, staggered pedestrian crossings and pavements interrupted by side roads are designed to ease motor traffic movement but all detract from the street environment and walking experience.

#### **The pedestrian environment**

Providing quality, lively open space where people feel happy to wander, linger and rest will encourage people to socialise more in public places. At present walking is the dominant activity in London's streets and squares and can be classified by three different types:

- ❶ necessary: functional, such as shopping and commuting
- ❷ optional: recreational, including walking for pleasure, sight-seeing
- ❸ social : such as sitting and reading, relaxing at a pavement café, looking and talking

Forming the city landscape

Traffic environment

- where Car is King



Pedestrian environment

- walking along



- hearing and talking  
in the city



- getting across



- climate in the city



- getting around



- looking at the city



- sitting in the city



- the city by night



Cycling environment

- cycling in the city



Optional and social activities are seen as indicators of a successful city environment and developing conditions to encourage such activities is therefore considered essential. However, whilst there are concentrations of cafés and other amenities in certain areas, in general there are relatively few facilities such as seating and public art to encourage social or optional activities.

Overall London has not been designed with recreation in mind and it is noticeable that there are few children or elderly using the streets and limited accessibility for those with mobility impairments. To support this, survey results from Regent Street and Tottenham Court Road show that approximately 96% of all pedestrians are between the ages of 15 and 64.

Walking in London is currently identified as being essentially functional and is largely undertaken out of necessity. For example, most locations studied showed that there was little seasonal or daily variance in pedestrian flows suggesting that walking is predominantly on a 'need to' basis and not - as found in many other cities - combined with extensive promenading on good days.

Other survey results indicate that public space often fails to cater adequately for the needs of the pedestrian: for example there is evidence to suggest that some of the busiest pavements are frequently overcrowded. Oxford Street west of Oxford Circus is cited as being particularly crowded with 80% of the daily pedestrian traffic being beyond comfortable walking capacity.

However these and other such findings need to be viewed in the context of the historic built form of much of the city and in the light of past planning policies.

### **The cycling environment**

The introduction of Congestion Charging presents an opportunity to re-examine how we use our space both for walking and cycling. London has excellent natural conditions for developing a cycling culture: in general it is relatively flat and the city centre is reasonably compact. Consequently this often favours quick and comfortable journeys by bike. However there are not enough cycle facilities at present to encourage any significant numbers of people to take up cycling.

Serious consideration needs to be given to developing a network of safer, quality routes to a consistent standard and format alongside an education programme for all road users on how to be aware of, and respect, each others' rights and needs.



Obstacle course on the footway



Narrow footways



Unnecessary footway interruptions



Difficult crossings



Poor access



Lack of room - lack of seats



Cluttered streetscape



Poor conditions for cyclists

### Turning a city around - the levels of change required

The problems and opportunities that London faces are compared at three levels:

- ① city-wide: macro-level, where issues are generic to the whole city and fundamental to the overall nature of movement
- ① area-wide: looking at conditions applicable within localities
- ① detailed: micro-level, where specific details on streets and squares are identified

#### City-wide issues

At the locations surveyed the issues that emerged regularly were:

- ① vehicular traffic dominating the streetscape, conflicting with other road users as well as contributing to high noise levels
- ① pedestrians often crossing roads away from designated facilities, also when the lights were against them; there are examples at Piccadilly Circus where three out of every four people crossing the road risked doing so when vehicular traffic had priority
- ① poor conditions for cyclists and little awareness of cyclists' needs by other users

These issues are compounded by the lack of data on pedestrian movement meaning that until now the pedestrian has been largely invisible in the planning process.

#### Area-wide issues

The problems are varied and include:

- ① pavements that cannot adequately accommodate the volume of users
- ① interruptions to journeys on foot as a result of poorly designed crossings, staggered crossings and subways
- ① unwelcoming streets due to bad lighting or a lack of active, attractive ground floor frontages

#### Detailed issues

At the 'micro-level' the problems that occur on the street include:

- ① guard railing that 'herds' people on pavements
- ① clutter and obstruction from excessive and poorly sited street furniture
- ① lack of seating which restricts social interaction
- ① difficult access for the disabled, elderly, infirm or those with pushchairs
- ① generally a poor street environment

### Improving conditions for public space and public life

The overall aims and benefits of implementing changes at the city-wide, area-wide and detailed levels are identified as:

- ① encouraging more journeys on foot and by bike, with associated environmental and economic benefits
- ① getting more people to rest and spend time in the city to engender a more vibrant, interactive public space
- ① safer, better public transport interchanges (especially buses)
- ① more accessible streets and town centres
- ① the revitalisation and regeneration of town centres



Capitalize on the unique qualities



Create a better balance between traffic and other city users



Improve conditions for walking in the city



Ensure access for all



Improve conditions for staying in the city



Improve the visual quality of the streetscape



Improve conditions for cycling

To achieve a quality public realm London needs to shift from being a city that people simply pass through as part of a functional journey. It needs to become a series of more interactive spaces that offer opportunities for a wide range of activities to take place within each area. The design of these quality spaces and places must reflect how people move rather than focusing primarily on vehicular traffic.

A range of solutions is proposed to create these conditions:

- ① celebrating London's potential as a 'green' city and maximising the use of facilities such as the city squares, the River Thames and the parks
- ① creating a better balance between vehicular traffic and other road users
- ① improving road safety
- ① reducing the impact of traffic on the city environment
- ① providing further quality solutions for public transport
- ① developing a coherent pedestrian policy
- ① enhancing the walking experience by introducing streets with greater pedestrian priority
- ① removing obstacles on the pavement such as unnecessary signposts and badly located litterbins
- ① developing more interesting walking routes and places where people can relax with public art, landscaping, planting and seating
- ① upgrading pedestrian crossings and improving access for all
- ① creating a robust design policy that takes account of climatic conditions (such as the value of direct sunlight in seating areas) when designing public space
- ① upgrading building facades
- ① improving conditions for cycling

### **The process of introducing change**

The process of how change is pursued and managed is critical. It will take time to effect change and the solution cannot be prescriptive but must develop and evolve over time. The process needs to be iterative, from initial discussion to developing a strategy with ongoing evaluation, implementation and restructuring.

It needs also to be adaptable and responsive to change as well as being inclusive, involving not only the key decision makers and delivery agents but also Londoners; encouraging them to enjoy and use their city. The importance of leadership, vision and commitment to drive the whole process is the key to successful change and a successful city in the future that meets the demands of all who visit, live or work in it.

London has the potential to be a truly great walking city but it will require dedication, collaboration and considerable human and financial resources.



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