

Parliament Square – masterpiece of public space

Tom Ball champions the need to appreciate the qualities of Parliament Square as it is, and objects to the waste of effort directed at 'pedestrianising' a space which is already a masterpiece of public space, but isolated by traffic mismanagement.

It is time to wake up and take a fresh look at the existing Parliament Square - its context and particularly its design. There has been so much pompous disregard of the actual design, coupled with a fostering of an automatic assumption that the Square is neither well designed, nor actually 'pedestrianised', that those who have not taken the trouble to investigate the actual nature of the Square, are seduced by the proponents for change. The leaders of this view include Lords Rogers and Foster, and by their lack of proper analysis, Westminster City Council planning department through their consultation document on the Conservation Area of 'Westminster Abbey and Parliament Square'. The latter dismissing the Square as a negative area - because it is difficult to gain access.

The 'World Squares for All' proponents proposed that the road between the Square and St Margaret's church yard should be closed - and the 'island' being linked thereby to the Abbey's space. In essence that might be practicable but Boris Johnson has shelved that proposal on grounds of impact on traffic movements and costs.

The reality is that Parliament Square, designed by Grey Wornum in the '40s, is one of the finest urban landscape designs of its time. It is an area for pedestrians, balancing the formal and informal, providing a setting sensitive and carefully detailed, from which the surrounding buildings of state, governance and church are seen across the green foreground. This English setting, where grass is the material linking the essentials of a nation, allows for informality and formality, blended with carefully considered landscaping. Warm sunny days will see people enjoying the grass as is typical of London's 'liveability'. The formal stone seating and planters extend into casual seating along the raised planting beds. The Backdrop of London Plane trees on the west, shield some of the traffic presence, while the viewer is drawn to the magnificent complex of the World Heritage Site.

Formal axes are provided - one focusing on the North transept of the Abbey; and one on Parliament and Big Ben. Grey Wornum's careful layout allowed for points of crossing, but the Square has been restricted to being a traffic island, under successive highway authorities.

What needs to be done? Firstly stop any further waste of effort and money on producing new 'design' schemes for a square which is already well designed and 'pedestrianised'. Next, adjust the position of traffic controlled lights, incorporating timed pedestrian crossings, as has been done at Hyde Park Corner, and to a lesser extent at Trafalgar Square. Produce a maintenance plan and restoration of the fabric; and restore the Catalpa trees both in the Square and in St Margaret's church yard. This would be a fraction of the cost of a new hard paved scheme, and infinitely more suitable, while also recognising the quality of the thinking, imagination and design detail of Grey Wornum.

Tom Ball is a member of the Thorney Island Society, the London Forum and the Westminster Society

