FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

Nottingham’s Old Market Square has been transformed by Gustafson Porter’s modern re-interpretation of the historic space.
Tim Coultchard visits the city to see how the project is being received.

For 800 years, Old Market Square has stood at the heart of Nottingham, a constant presence quietly witnessing the evolution of the city. At 11,500m², it is the second largest square in Britain after London’s Trafalgar Square. Its sheer scale demanded a role at the heart of the city’s social, cultural, and commercial life for centuries.

“The Guardian of the City” was how Gustafson Porter described the space when putting together its successful entry for the design competition that triggered its redevelopment. It was an important acknowledgement of the square’s role in the city as the public – at times nervously, at times cynically – awaited the results of the transformation.

This latest incarnation involved the replacement of a 11 design by TC Howitt, architect of the adjacent Council House building that stands imposingly on the east side of the square. The impetus behind the 2004 international design competition (run by Nottingham City Council) was the widespread view that the square no longer served the modern city effectively. There had been previous attempts to launch a redeveloped square, but the looming expiry of European funding earmarked for the project forced a more urgent approach among the city’s politicians.

Old Market Square has long served a variety of ad hoc: a formal functions – from the spontaneous revelry that greets Nottingham Forest’s European Cup victories in the early 1990s to fairs, markets, and formal civic occasions. When occupied
The page contains a diagram of a city square with various annotations and text describing the design and plans for the area. The text discusses the square's central role in the city, its historical significance, and the need for improvements. It mentions the involvement of various stakeholders and the need for inclusive design.

The text also emphasizes the importance of creating a space that encourages social interaction and community engagement. The goal is to create a welcoming environment that can be enjoyed by all, regardless of age or ability. The use of greenery and public art is highlighted as important elements in achieving this goal.

The page concludes with a statement about the importance of collaboration and communication in the planning process. It highlights the need for ongoing dialogue with residents and other stakeholders to ensure that the final design meets the needs and preferences of the community.
analysis of pedestrian movement in Old Market Square 
adjacent streets would be crucial to the overall philosophy 
design. By plotting and analysing the routes taken across 
area, Space Syntax made a series of critical observations 
recommendations. 

Simply, the centre of the space had become a no-go zone 
destinations. "The current layout of the square does not 
e direct pedestrian routes across the space - traversing 
area involves multiple changes of level and direction," 
Syndey Space Syntax verdict. "As a result, the routes that cross 
the square are considerably less accessible than the 
along its edges." In fact, 78 per cent of pedestrians entering 
the square did not enter its central position, put off by the 
raised platforms and walls that obstructed the route. 

Custalson Porter scheme therefore concentrated on cre- 
ates across the space and re-integration with the rest of 
the city by emphasising the links to the main streets of 
the city. Two major diagonal routes through the 
now facilitate pedestrian movement between strategic 
areas. These diagonal routes are also reminders of the 
history through the city. The diagonal movement through 
area is intended to animate its centre and create a vibrant 
urban fabric by balancing the pedestrian movement with more 
commercial activities, new east-west routes enable access to specialist 
and popular events. By removing obstructions such as...

"The new scheme concentrated on creating routes across the space 
and re-integration with the city"
ramped level changes, steps and balustrades, a greater flexibility in the arrangement of events such as fairs, markets, and performances will allow a better choreography of movement. The layout leaves four spaces for rest and events, the water feature to the west, the seating steps to the north, the market place at the centre and the tram stops to the south.

The intrusive level changes that characterised the square's previous incarnation are gone. Instead, a long ramp extends from the northwest corner into the heart of the area, the very part that had been a no-go zone before. Its traces an historic map line that divided the city into Norman and Anglo-Saxon areas centuries before.

The ramp skirts the water terraces, with the FSC-recommended sustainable tatajuba timber balustrade providing a gentle curve of impromptu seating along its side. The other side of the ramp is lined with stepped seating terraces of grey, black, white and beige granite blocks that delineate level changes, providing a constant flow that provides the requisite places for rest without cluttering the rest of the space.

The line of seating along the north of the space is reflected by a line of Gingko biloba trees along the elevated, sunnier position of Long Row, where it is hoped the terrace feel will encourage the arrival of a café culture.

The water terraces in the west offer an alternative and spectacular focus to the Council House that dominates the square's east side. The contemporary interpretation of an historic system is a series of three water terraces that change character as water passes down the slope of the square's west side. The water appears as though it is passing through a purification system.

During the day, the three water feature terraces are the square's active element. When the market occupies the centre of the space, the water terraces remain an alternative focus around which people can sit. However, when a major event takes place in front of the Council House, the water feature can be switched off and drained, and its terraces then serve as an amphitheatre for civic and cultural events.

In surfacing, seating and planters, granite proliferates as the dominant material. It was sourced mainly from Portugal and the specification was based on the desire to create a scheme that...
would last for decades. To ensure its durability, four different granites were laid in test slabs outside the Council House and their performance was observed over several months before final specification was made. The rich, patterned appearance of the final selection adds texture to the larger areas of uniform surfacing and has the added bonus of rendering the ubiquitous chewing gum almost invisible.

While most of the site is given over to the hard surfacing needed for a robust and adaptable event space, its sides are flanked by planters containing more than 800 shrubs and 4,000 bulbs. Seven mature Pinus sylvestris and six Quercus palustris trees were also planted to mark natural borders to the square.

The Speirs and Major lighting scheme is used to reinforce the flow of the new diagonal movement lines, while also offering flexible options for illumination during public events. Nottingham city centre has become increasingly populated by numerous and varied columns that house lighting, signs, CCTV cameras and tram power lines, creating a cluttered appearance. The new design has attempted to avoid repeating the mistakes elsewhere by using multi-purpose columns that employ down lights, banner fittings and uplighting with reflectors to create a variety of options and lighting treatments, with less disruption to the flow of the space.

These are complemented by fibre optics below the water jets and concealed lighting to benches, steps and handrails. Five listed lanterns and two flagpoles have also been refurbished and

"The water terraces in the west offer an alternative and spectacular focus to the Council House that dominates the east"
"The Speirs and Major lighting scheme reinforces the flow of the new diagonal movement lines"

integrated into the new scheme.

The square re-opened in April last year, marking the end of a three-year journey for the landscape team at Gustafson Porter that had seen the project through from its beginning in 2004. The process has not always been simple — the importance of the square to the city's residents meant there was some opposition to the scheme, inspired by debate about the design, the cost of the project (almost £7m) and the lengthy period of upheaval during construction.

The design competition, while ultimately decided by a judging panel, also featured a public vote element, in which Gustafson Porter's scheme was the favourite. Nilesh Patel, a member of the Gustafson Porter team, is philosophical about the nature of public acceptance for the design. "Even if it had been the public's favourite at that stage, who knows what they would have thought when it was built? Perceptions of projects change — look at the Millennium Dome, people don't speak badly of it now that it has found a new purpose."

He also rightly points out that landscape design grows on people in a more subtle way than that of buildings: "When you see a model of a building, it can be seen as more of a constant, whereas landscapes change over time. This landscape has been designed to be there for many years and it will adapt gradually over time. Schemes prove their worthiness when they are finished and being used by people."/...

1 & 2 The lighting scheme by Speirs and Major

THE PROFESSIONAL'S VIEW

It is appropriate that the 2004 competition to redesign Nottingham's historic Old Market Square was won by a practice headed by a designer who had originally trained in textiles and fashion, once the lifeblood of this city. Kathryn Gustafson, co-founder of Gustafson Porter, has brought her distinctive sculptural style to the site, gathering up the threads of the community, its culture and outlook, to knit a new place into the older fabric around and to spark regeneration.

Old Market Square lies to the east of Nottingham Castle, contained by the medieval streets on ground that falls south from Long Row, its north side, to South Parade below. TC Howitt's elegant 1920s Council House concludes the space on the east, with the evocatively named Beast Market Hill to the west. The NET tram bounds the south and west of the site.

The square needed to regain its status as a focal point for Nottingham, for daily use or specific events and to reflect the city's status as one of Britain's eight 'Core' cities. The design needed to guarantee accessibility and orientation to provide a welcoming, uncluttered and, above all, safe space. It needed to be robust in terms of legibility and materials and easy to maintain. Has it succeeded?

When I visited on a bright, cold Sunday afternoon, Nottingham was recovering from 'the night before' in the square. What is abundantly clear is the space's ingrained character. Despite its new minimalist modelling, this remains a medieval square; it is dark, colourful, vocal, full of movement and small dramas. It is good that such robust materials — granite, brushed steel, hardwood — were chosen as all are already grubby and marked with use. The mesmerising water feature, a mix of flat and angled planes, complete with water spouts and falls, dominates the west end of the square and can be drained to be used as a performance space. It attracted paddlers and reflectors, while a temporary Ferris wheel occupied the main space.

The square follows the topography in a series of broad and narrow terraces, some tapering into the ground, others rising up into tiered seats or planters. Movement continues in the paving of the central area, which decreases in unit size towards the edges, creating a sense of excitement and moving off. The terraces are themselves of different widths and colours — a cool palette of black to buff — perhaps incongruous in a city of red brick, but offering different options for use. The high and broad terraces on the north side complement the 'fast track' route marked behind in the paving along Long Row, the rear of the terrace offering rest for those with time to spare. On the south, the terraces are broader, slower, perhaps anticipating the wait for a tram. Ferris wheel aside, this is an easy space to negotiate, clear views fostering a sense of independence and security.

The design was tasked to knit into the surrounding townscape. It does, but with varying degrees of success. In Long Row, the new paving successfully flows into the buildings, many of which are clad in granite. However, to the east, the square stops abruptly against an expense of 1990s coloured brick paving. Differences in quality and condition being only too evident. Likewise to the south, the design stops at the street, sitting uncomfortably with the perfectly
Gustafson Porter was aware of the mixed feelings for the project from the outset, says Patel. "Members of the public always made comments when we were on site. Some people would brand it a waste of money. But there had been a lot of disruption for people to endure, so perhaps that was partly to blame – we didn’t take it to heart."

Spend time in Old Market Square now and one can see that the forms of use envisaged in the original design philosophy are being realised. Certainly the removal of awkward levels and creation of new diagonal movement axes have liberated the centre of the square, and even on a crisp winter’s day when we visited, the seating terraces were well used.

In recent months, the scale of the open areas has been temporarily lost as first an ice rink and latterly a Ferris wheel have occupied the space. While these interventions may intrude on the aesthetics and appreciation of the design, they are nothing if not giant reminders that this historic square has been reclaimed for the people.

Hopes for the area are high – a 2001 report by consultants Scott Wilson estimated that re-development of the square could create up to 400 jobs and boost Nottingham’s economy by £12m each year. Its success will be judged not in the first year, but by how it stands up to decades of use and how the city incorporates it into its life, an approach to evaluation that would doubtless please its designers.

"This landscape has been designed to be there for many years and it will adapt gradually over time"

Nilesh Patel, Gustafson Porter
Project
Old Market Square, Nottingham, UK.

Client
Nottingham City Council

Budget
£7m

Site size
11.5ha

Work schedule
October 2005-March 2007

Lead landscape architects and design team
For Gustafsson Porter Ltd:
Mary Bowman, Dominik Bueckers, Mark Gillingham, Kathryn Gustafsson, Inês Marques, Nilush Patel, Neil Porter, Kinna Stallard

Quantity surveyors
Davis Langdon LLP

Specification
Davis Langdon Schumann Smith

Engineers
Ove Arup and Partners Ltd

Lighting design
Speirs and Major Associates

Public realm design advisors
Space Syntax Ltd

Conservation consultant
Jules Renfrew Associates

Soil specialist
Tim O’Hare

Main contractor
Balfour Beatty Civil Engineering Ltd

Water feature specialist
OCMIS Ltd

Architectural metalwork
WD Close and Sons Ltd

Natural stone paving and cladding
BDN Construction Ltd

Lighting works
J. McCann & Co Ltd

Historic architectural metalwork
Chris Topp & Co Ltd

Soft landscape
Ashlea Ltd

Materials
Main material used is a light grey Portuguese granite, complemented by beige granite, also from Portugal, and smaller areas of white and black granites from China. Granite surfaces laid with a hydraulic mortar supplied by Steintec Ltd

Planting details
Mature trees supplied by Van den Berk Nurseries: Ginkgo biloba and Quercus palustris
Perennials: Geranium ‘Brookside’
Grasses: Miscanthus sinensis ‘Morning Light’
(About 25% of planting space was left clear, for additional planting to be introduced by Nottingham in Bloom)

Suppliers
Lighting: Meyer, Philips, WE-EF, LEC
Lyon, Sill, Louis Poulsen, Urbis Lighting
NJCO, Group C Lighting, Mode Lighting
Street furniture: Townscape Ltd (cycle racks), Broxap (bins), ACO Technologies and Elkington Gatic Ltd (slot drains),
Surfspan Ltd (access covers)
Bespoke elements: all seating elements are formed from solid granite blocks, averaging 500mm in width, 400mm high, and 1400mm long
Feature lighting masts supplied by Abacus Lighting Ltd and Siteco Ltd
In-ground electrical power units set below the main square, by Landmark Products Ltd
Tree grilles and corsets by Machan Engineering Ltd
Balustrades and armrests by WD Close Ltd, Jakob tension wire by MMA Ltd
Freedom of movement

Gustafson Porter's re-design of Old Market Square, Nottingham

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