

Shared Surface Street Design: Report of focus groups held in Holland



Guide Dogs

Report of focus groups held in Holland

Background

During the last year or so several Local Authorities in the UK have redesigned Town Centre High Streets, following the concept of shared space. The shared space concept aims to reduce the dominance of vehicles and make high streets more people-friendly. We would support these aims, but the implementation raises concerns¹.

Shared space is described as a concept, a multi-disciplinary and interactive process with an active input from the relevant citizens and their lobby organisations². This again is supported. Our concerns relate to the design implementation of this concept where it takes the form of a shared surface.

The main concern of blind and partially sighted people is the removal of the separation between motorised vehicles and pedestrians, mainly through the removal of the traditional pavement and kerb. This is a feature of many of the streetscape designs which have followed the shared space concept.

In response to the concerns raised, Guide Dogs is undertaking a research project. This aims to identify the concerns of blind and partially sighted people in relation to the use of shared surfaces in the public realm and how these can be addressed. One of the key objectives of our research project is to develop design principles, techniques and standards that provide for the requirements of blind and partially sighted people and fulfil the Shared Space concept in so far as it conditions drivers and other road users. We also want to ensure we take account of the requirements of other disabled people.

The research project methodology includes:

- An advisory group including key government and professional representatives
- Literature review
- Identification of a sample of towns in the UK which have implemented shared surfaces
- Focus groups of local blind and partially sighted people in these areas
- Additional pan disability focus groups in some areas
- Consultation with a range of national disability organisations
- Consultation with local authorities
- Design workshops and development of design principles

In the literature review, and in discussions with advocates of shared space, a common theme has been the view that shared space works well in Europe. However approaches to organisations representing blind and partially sighted people cast doubt on this where shared surfaces are used. We therefore undertook to hold focus groups in the Netherlands (Holland) to explore this.

¹ Joint Committee on Mobility of Blind and Partially Sighted People Policy Statement: Shared Space in the Public Realm

² Shared Space: Room for everyone - www.shared-space.org

Why Holland?

Hans Monderman is recognised as a founding figure of the shared space concept in Holland and street designs based on the concept have been in place for many years. Within the limited time and resources for this part of the project we decided to concentrate on one area of Europe. However a wider study of the application of shared space in Europe where it involves shared surfaces and the implications for and effect on blind and partially sighted people, and other groups such as other disabled people, elderly people and small children is recommended.

We contacted the Netherlands Federation of Blind and Partially Sighted People. Officers had not been involved in and were not aware of research into the implications of shared surface designs. They advocate a clear separation between pedestrian areas and areas used by cars and other vehicles and cyclists. They considered that there were issues for blind and partially sighted people that had not been adequately considered in shared surfaces. They welcomed our research project and offered to help arrange focus groups in Utrecht.

Site Visits

With the help of the Netherlands Federation, and Ben Hamilton-Baillie³, we selected towns to visit. It is recognised that this was a limited snapshot of the many areas of Holland and elsewhere in Europe that have utilised the shared space concept. The visits enabled us to view some towns with shared surfaces so that we could discuss these with the focus groups.

We visited Haren and Drachten, towns that were familiar to the participants in the focus groups.

Focus Groups

Two focus groups were held in the Utrecht offices of the Netherlands Federation of Blind and Partially Sighted People on 7th April 2006:

- Focus group of blind and partially sighted people from local areas
- Focus group of professionals with a work interest in streetscape design and the shared space concept.

Focus group of blind and partially sighted people

The focus group was attended by 7 participants plus Guide Dogs staff Peter Barker, Carol Thomas and Veronica Barton.

The objectives of the focus group were:

- To explore the participants' experience of shared surface street design schemes.
Within this -

³ Ben Hamilton-Baillie, Hamilton – Baillie Associates

- To establish any design features or layouts that help them move around in these areas
- To identify any problems and coping strategies
- To consider mobility training in shared surface areas
- To explore whether participants had been involved in any consultation and if so whether they considered their views had any effect.

The Participants

The participants were all familiar with shared surface areas in Haren or Drachten or both. They were a mix of blind people with little residual vision, and partially sighted people. Guide dog owners and cane users were represented.

Experience of shared space design areas:

Vehicles and cyclists

All of the participants reported greater difficulty using shared surface areas than areas where there is a pavement separated from the road. Several participants considered that most vehicle drivers reduced their speed in shared surface areas and that most vehicle drivers and cyclists were considerate of pedestrians using shared surfaces.

However one participant commented that

**“9 out of 10 cars would stop for me.
My difficulty is recognising the 10th”**

Use of shared surface areas

All except one of the participants regularly used local shared surface areas alone, without a sighted companion, but found this difficult. One participant commented that:

**“We have to use these areas or
we will lose our independence”**

One participant, older than the others, reported that he no longer used shared surface areas unless he was with a sighted companion.

Learning and sticking to a route

All the participants who used their local shared surface area reported that they had learned a route and they stuck to this route when alone, moving from one orientation clue to another. If they want to visit premises that are not on their learned route they would wait to do this when with a companion.

They had all lost their bearings at times, even though following a learned route. There was emphasis on the difference between losing their way in a pedestrian only area and losing their way in a shared surface area where there was fear of walking into the path of a vehicle.

Visiting unfamiliar areas

Most of the participants would not visit an area they did not know well without a companion. Reasons given for this related to difficulty in finding their way. Shared surface was not the only reason given but most participants commented that if there was more consistency between towns they would be more likely to try it on their own. Particular mention was made of recognisable tactile clues. Again the comment was made by several participants that getting lost was a concern in itself but this, combined with the fear that they could inadvertently walk into the path of traffic, added to this concern.

Only one participant, a lady guide dog owner in her twenties, said that she would go to unfamiliar areas and had recently done so for a job interview after obtaining directions between the train station and office. She had asked passers by for assistance.

Helpful design features or layouts

All participants were agreed that there should be clear demarcation between the pedestrian area and the road. If there is no kerb this should be a consistent recognised tactile surface. All agreed that a pavement with kerb was the preferred option.

In relation to tactile surfaces participants wanted these to be consistent both within a town and between towns. Several participants reported that hard tactile tiles, which were acoustic when walked on, were better than rubber tiles.

Participants with some sight stated that colour contrast was useful, both on tactile surfaces and street furniture, but this was often not consistent even within a town.

Several participants referred to a crossing point in Drachten where a tactile line leads to the crossing. While it was considered that this could have been useful it was too narrow and so could easily be stepped over and missed. Also the tactile line ran near to an ATM (cash point facility) and so there were often people standing on the tactile surface while queuing to use the ATM.

Problem areas

All participants reported that they tried to keep to a straight line close to the building line. However obstructions outside premises such as shop displays made this difficult. There was often no 'outer shore line' (such as kerb edge or tactile surface). If they veered off their straight line because of avoiding an obstruction they either did not realise until they were in the road or if they did realise it was difficult to get back on a straight line.

Again the importance of keeping to a learned route was stressed. While participants noted that this prevented spontaneous choices it was nevertheless the preferred way of coping. If something on their learned route changed or moved this had serious consequences.

Several participants commented that they are not aware of entering or leaving a shared surface area. Where a sighted person would immediately notice he/she has to share the road with motor vehicles and cyclists, the visually impaired pedestrian will not. Participants highlighted the need for tactile clues that make the blind pedestrian aware of entering/leaving a shared surface area requiring special attention.

Mobility Training

Participants relied on their mobility training to learn a specific route and stick to this unless with a companion. In answer to a question of whether there were any tips that could be used in training in the UK there was a negative response. The comment was made that mobility training relied on there being sufficient clues in the environment to enable you to know where you are and decide where to go. If there were not sufficient clues or they were not consistent it would not be possible to learn a route. A further comment was that if there was consistency in design clues, both within a town and from one town to another, this would help to enable independence.

One of the guide dog owners commented that she relied on her dog knowing the route. There was concern that over-reliance on the dog took the control and decision making from the owner and that if the dog made a mistake she (the guide dog owner) would not be able to correct it. (This issue was also raised in the second focus group by professional mobility instructors).

Consultation

One of the participants who worked as a Mobility Officer had been asked for her views through this role. However she considered that her views had not had any effect on the design. None of the other participants were aware of any consultation on street design in their areas.⁴ As one person said:

**“If we had been asked what we wanted
we would not have asked for this”**

⁴ Note: Following a verbal report on the findings of the focus group, Hans Monderman has commented that he has consulted blind and partially sighted people in Drachten and Haren. We will explore further with him the groups he consulted and if or how their views were taken into account. The Netherlands Federation has confirmed that they are not aware of any such consultation. The focus group meeting in April was seen by the Netherlands Federation as the start of the dialogue with the Shared Space project.

Focus group of professionals with a work interest in streetscape design and shared space

The objectives of this focus group were:

- To explore and establish the standards relating to the street environment in the Netherlands and reference to shared space and shared surfaces.
- To identify and explore research evaluating shared surface areas and in particular the impact on blind and partially sighted and other disabled people.
- To explore whether there has been consultation with blind and partially sighted and other disabled people or representative organisations and if so how views were taken into account.
- To consider the perceived benefits and disadvantages of shared space and shared surface designs and any evaluation of these that we could learn from.

The participants in this focus group represented the following organisations/ interests.

- Keuning Institute Shared Space Organisation
- Government - Transport research centre at the Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management; Traffic safety section
- CROW National Access Standards
- Sensis (Visual Impairment Rehabilitation Organisation)
- Visio (Visual Impairment Rehabilitation Organisation)
- Guide Dogs Netherlands
- Organisation of cyclists
- National Federation of Blind and Partially Sighted People Netherlands (Chair and Mobility Policy Officer)

Standards

The Transport research centre representative stated that in the Netherlands the street environment is classified as a residential area or a traffic area. Traffic areas are well regulated whereas in residential areas there are less regulations or standards. Home zones are clearly residential areas. Town centres may be a grey area (between a traffic and residential area) but are normally classified as residential areas.

Guidance for home zones precludes pavements. One participant commented that home zones were a trend of the 1980's but are less common now.

Participants noted several differences between Holland and the UK. Typically roads are about 6m wide in Holland, much less than in the UK. 30 km/ph speed limits are common in a significant proportion of 'residential' areas in Holland.

Home zones and some shopping areas classified as residential are typically not through roads (they are only accessed by people who live there or are visiting there). 'Traffic areas' cater for people wanting to travel from A to B.

Participants were not aware of any clear references to shared space or shared surface designs within national standards.

Accessibility standards and guidance

Access standards say that public spaces should be accessible to all. It was pointed out by the transport research centre representative that areas should be inclusive. Safety should not be measured in averages where around 15% of people were exceptions to this average. Areas that work for the majority of people but are not accessible or safe for, say, 15% of people are not acceptable.

The National Federation of Blind and Partially Sighted People advocate clear separation between pedestrian and vehicular areas with a difference in surface that can be seen and felt. This has been published in various documents including a handbook on accessibility.

The representative of the Keuning Institute shared space organisation noted that the term shared space was new in the last 2 years. Before then there had been some town centre designs which had aspects of shared space. These were experiments aiming to improve urban design. 'Shared space' as a term had begun to be used in the last 2 years but it is not a religion or science, merely a way of thinking about public space. The approach is to encourage civility by influencing attitudes and behaviour.

He explained that 'shared space' seemed to be considered by some as removing kerbs and having a shared road surface. However shared space is a concept about civility and influencing behaviour. This does not necessarily mean taking away pavements and kerbs. He noted that in Belgium the shared space project organisers wanted to keep the kerbs, so they did, and influenced behaviour in other ways such as changing the lighting.

Research and Evaluation

Participants noted that there has been some research into traffic speed (though there was some disagreement as to any conclusive results as yet). However there had been no known research into the impact of shared space or shared surfaces on pedestrians. It was agreed that such evaluations should be undertaken. The evaluations should include the impact on blind and partially sighted people and other vulnerable groups, and whether or not people avoid shared surface areas or use them less. A study of those using the area was not sufficient.

Several participants commented on articles on shared space describing the psychological influence on drivers. These were said by participants to be assumptions which had not been validated by research.

The representative of the Keuning Institute said that the key issue has been to make drivers feel less safe so that they take more care. Research is planned in over 20 places in the next 2 years, beginning with looking at data on speed reduction. Research into the experience of pedestrians had not been planned though he may now look again at this.

Several participants commented on the assumption that the shared space aims of improved quality of urban space and civility had been interpreted by some as 'shared surfaces'. There was concern that designers were taking on one physical aspect of the shared space concept and transferring a design that had been seen in one area to another area without taking on the wider aspects of the concept, considering the context and involving local people.

Impact on blind and partially sighted people and other disabled people

Participants were not aware of any research to evaluate the impact of shared surfaces on blind and partially sighted people or other disabled people. It was agreed that if such research were to be carried out there should be consideration of those who may no longer use an area or use it less. One participant, from a visual impairment rehabilitation organisation, noted that shared surfaces may be good for wheelchair users but not elderly people or children but was not aware of any research on this.

The cyclist representative stated that there should be a distinction between evaluating orientation / wayfinding and safety. Some blind people may have wayfinding difficulties in many areas, not necessarily just shared surfaces. Where there is a shared surface with vehicles this becomes a safety issue. However the mobility professionals noted that the lack of clues in the environment in some shared surface areas created additional wayfinding problems as well as the safety issue.

The representative of the Dutch Guide Dogs Association had trained clients in Haren and commented that a blind person relies on tactile orientation clues and the lack of these makes orientation, and training, difficult. There are some areas in Haren that are very difficult for a blind person and training in these areas is avoided as unsafe.

She noted that previously in Haren there had been pavements but both pedestrians and cyclists used these and this was dangerous too. Now she trains blind people in the pedestrian area of Haren but the absence of clear demarcation with the road is a problem. There is some colour contrast between the pedestrian area and the road which can help people with some sight but this is not consistent.

She went on to say that the blind person loses control in an area where they can't orientate and relies more on sighted assistance. Where clients have a guide dog this can be easier as in some cases the dog will learn a route more easily than the client. Some dogs can be trained to recognise changes such as colour contrast. However not all dogs can do this. The clients tend to rely on their dogs more than in an area with a pavement and kerb. Over-reliance

on the dog is not recommended as if the dog makes a mistake the blind person would not realise and could end up in the middle of the road.

Consultation

Participants considered that there should be consultation before changes are introduced and afterwards to evaluate the change. However participants did not think this had happened.

The representative of the Keuning Institute stated that there had been consultation with a school in Haren that was for blind and deaf children and there were no problems with the shared surface areas. However another participant, from Visio, who knew the area well interrupted here to say that most children arrive at the school in their parents' cars. Few children travel in to school alone walking or cycling and those that do mainly come from the end of town that does not require travel through the shared surface area.

Asked about other consultation with local disabled people the Keuning Institute representative replied that he was not aware of any. He reiterated that the shared space concept was about civility, attitude and behaviour, not design standards. However he added that the concept relied on the use of eye contact to inform behaviour and that he recognised this would be a problem for blind people. He admitted that 'we forgot about the blind' and that this had been a mistake.

He went on to reiterate that shared space was a concept, a process, schemes on the ground were experimental, and that evaluation of some implementation projects was now taking place. He referred to the EU shared space project which involved a range of partners with projects across Europe. Communication and consultation were the next phases of this project and were to be considered at a conference later that month.

Perceived benefits and disadvantages of shared surface designs

Participants noted again that the focus of the shared space concept is the improvement of the quality of the urban space and civility of the users of the space. Most concerns about shared space arose from the implementation of some specific designs such as shared road surfaces.

The Keuning Institute representative commented that there is less traffic in Haren now and reduced speed but other participants questioned this as there was not yet evidence to show this. He also considered that pedestrians felt more in charge now but again evidence for this was questioned by other participants. It was acknowledged by all that the impact on vulnerable groups such as blind people should be studied.

Participants commented that traffic speed can be reduced and driver behaviour influenced without removing pavements and kerbs.

The representative from CROW (standards organisation) commented that for a shared surface area to work there needed to be more pedestrians than cars so that pedestrian use could be seen to be the main use.

Several participants noted that the 'law of the jungle' puts the car at the top of the tree. A space which is shared by lots of cars and pedestrians will be a complex problematic space. The needs of vulnerable groups of pedestrians must be placed at the top of the hierarchy.

The transport research centre representative commented on the perceived benefit of influencing driver behaviour through psychology that was the subject of much of the popular literature on shared space had not been validated by research.

Taking this forward

Participants were asked what lessons the UK could learn from the implementation of shared space, through shared surfaces, in Holland.

The key points raised were:

- Shared space through shared surfaces should not be seen as a goal.
- The process is important. This includes the context, the purpose and function of the area, and the involvement of local stakeholders. Consideration of these should be done before designs. It was considered very important not to start with the design. This focus on the process was acknowledged as a fundamental part of the existing shared space philosophy but it was also acknowledged that it may not always be followed.
- The context must be considered. The context in Holland includes the classification of roads into traffic and residential areas and widespread speed restrictions of 30 km/ph.
- Local context issues would include the current purpose and function of the area and intended changes to this. Would it be mainly an area for traffic or pedestrians? Where both would use the area what was intended to be the dominant use? Would traffic be mainly those vehicles accessing the area or would there be through traffic?
- Involvement of local stakeholders must include consultation with vulnerable groups such as blind and partially sighted people, other disabled people, and elderly people. The requirements of children are also important.
- The design should come towards the end of the process, should be appropriate to the context, and stakeholders including vulnerable people should be involved.
- Design principles that are based on the needs of vulnerable people should underpin the design process.

- Safety, particularly of vulnerable groups, must be an important consideration. The design and layout must indicate clearly to pedestrians, particularly blind people, where they are safe.
- The physical transfer of a design that seems to work in one area to another area without going through the process was not in line with the shared space philosophy.
- New design features should be trialled before implementation.
- Changes to the design and layout of public spaces must be monitored and the research used to change aspects that are not working well. The research should evaluate the changes against the intended objectives and take particular note of any unintended impact on vulnerable groups.

Conclusion

All participants agreed that this had been a worthwhile meeting and that the issues raised needed to be taken forward. The Keuning Institute representative noted that there would be a conference of the EU shared space project partners later in April and he would raise these issues there. Communication and consultation would be themes of the conference.

The Keuning Institute representative also agreed to prepare a statement, in co-operation with the EU partners, to remind those considering implementing the shared space concept of the importance of the process and that starting with a fixed design idea or transferring a particular design from another area was not the shared space philosophy. He also suggested a conference be held in the UK later in the year to consider these issues further. Guide Dogs (UK) agreed to host this and he agreed to help arrange this.

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For further information please contact:

Carol Thomas

Access and Inclusion Manager

Guide Dogs

Email: carol.thomas@guidedogs.org.uk

Telephone: 01495 757093

Mobile: 07971 864419

Appendix

Site visits to view shared surface implementation in Holland.

We visited Haren and Drachten, towns that were familiar to the participants in the focus groups. We also visited Oosterwolde and Makkinga.

Haren –At either end of the town there is a fully shared area, with no road markings or marked pedestrian area. Between these two areas there is a narrow road area with a wide pedestrian area to either side, adjacent to shops and other premises. There is no kerb or clear demarcation between the pedestrian areas and the road. The pedestrian area has red paving and the road is black. This is not a clear contrast for partially sighted people. There is street furniture such as trees and barriers along the outer edges of the 2 pedestrian areas but these are not continuous and it would be possible for a blind person to walk between them and onto the road. Along the building line there are shop displays and a cycle rank which would inhibit following the building line. Where the pedestrian areas meet the shared surface at either end of the town there is no clear demarcation which would indicate to a blind person that they were entering the shared surface area. There is a crossing point (uncontrolled, similar to zebra) within the shared surface area but no tactile surface or other way of leading to this.

Drachten – The main street through the town has a wide pedestrian priority area to either side adjacent to the building line of shops etc. Between these there is a cyclist priority area shared with cars. There is a sloped kerb between the pedestrian area and the cyclist priority road area. Within the pedestrian areas there are shop displays and other obstructions along the building line, and street furniture such as planters and cycle racks in a straight line down the centre of pedestrian route. At either end of the pedestrian priority routes there are shared surface areas level with the pedestrian routes with no clear demarcation for blind people. There are signs to either end of the pedestrian route of entering / leaving a pedestrian priority route. There are similar signs at either end of the cyclist priority route where it meets the shared surface area. There is a crossing point (uncontrolled) marked within the shared surface area with a tactile line leading to this. (This was commented on within the focus group as being too narrow).

Oosterwolde – There is a winding river (or snake) pattern on the road which we presumed to aim at slowing drivers. Shared surface with no demarcation of pedestrian areas from road.

Makkinga – A different approach had been taken here with offset 'roundabouts' marked on road surface to slow drivers. Pavements and kerbs retained. We observed vehicles ignoring the offset 'roundabouts'.
