

STREET CLUTTER

One aspect of ‘Improving the Streetscape’ that has concerned the Trust for some time and which has been discussed in several annual reports, is street clutter: in recent years York’s hugely important streetscape has become seriously degraded by poles, signs, bollards, inappropriate paving, cycle tracks, poor streetlights, road humps, double yellow lines and so on. Two things are clear. First, the affect of clutter is a bit subliminal - most of us don’t notice it, but certainly it does affect the pleasure we gain from York’s special ambience. And second, nobody deliberately degrades one of the city’s most valuable assets. The problem is that the various changes are often implemented for specific reasons but without consideration of the historical or streetscape context. The first makes the job of removing clutter more challenging; the second is an endemic problem that must be solved.

Since the Trust began its anti-clutter campaign in York, the clutter problem has risen rapidly up the national agenda: we are not alone. English Heritage has promoted two policies – ‘Streets for All’ and, in association with the National Federation of Women’s Institutes, ‘Save Our Streets’; and the Council for the Preservation of Rural England has campaigned against ‘the cluttered countryside’.

In several towns and cities across Europe, there have been concerted efforts to reduce or eliminate clutter. Our efforts, like those elsewhere, are directed towards improving the visual appearance of the public realm, but there is a growing body of evidence that the removal of street signs can actually improve road safety. Hans Monderman first demonstrated in Holland that safety can be improved: in Drachten, for example, a busy intersection was redesigned without signs, with the result that congestion was reduced and safety improved.

The literature which explains the advantages of clutter removal is rapidly expanding. Perhaps Mathew Parris (The Times, 25/1/10) best reflects what most of us feel. Writing of recent improvements to Oxford Circus, he said:

“Urban planners and health and safety officers should be grabbed by their collars and made to confront the aesthetic misery they insinuate into our streetscapes. We screen out ugliness in our lives. We learn, subliminally, not to notice. In holiday snaps, postcards and publicity shots, we point the camera the other way. All my life I’ve lived with the hideous cage-work of poles and banners that was, until this year, Oxford Circus in London’s West End - and never really noticed. Then, one day, the whole lot was bulldozed away at the stroke of an enlightened mayoral pen, and as I emerged from the Underground station my heart lifted. Something was different, wonderfully so! The ironmongery of a hundred gibbets was gone. Grace, space and calm had settled on the scene.

A friend, an air pollution scientist, emails: “the cost of installing this c...p is phenomenal. Huge chunks of..... a budget [go] on installing pointless railings, bollards, ramps, etc. A single metal bollard (or road hump) typically costs £5,000 and there’s plenty of evidence that removing [the clutter] actually makes the road safer”.

In York, clutter is crucial in degrading the appearance of streets that are enjoyed both by residents and over 7 million annual visitors. There is good progress to report this year. In October, the City Council adopted a policy on ‘street furniture removal’. An audit of

traffic signs revealed over 15,000 on York's roads. The Council's study showed the cost of removing signs is often less than the cost of maintaining them, so clutter removal can actually save money; and not installing new signs also saves money. A budget has been established and work of removal has begun, first on removing traffic signs.

The most obvious example is the removal of the 'No Entry' sign that has blighted almost every photograph of the West front of the Minster for years.

The view of the Minster down Duncombe Place was especially created and is of national importance. It has for years been progressively degraded by overgrown trees, road signs, taxi-rank signs, power junction boxes, bus shelters, waste bins, telephone booths and a small forest of traffic lights and various poles.

This view has taken on greater value as it now greets every visitor who leaves the newly created (and very attractive) Visitor Information Centre at the top of Museum Street. The City has begun to rectify this disgracefully blemished streetscape by removing some signs and the white frames around some traffic lights, and by painting some poles in matt black - all good improvements, but much still remains to be done.

Good design and planning of the public realm is an urgent need in York. Where a space has been initially properly designed to a high quality - Duncombe Place, Tower Gardens, St Helen's Square (now much improved, with extensive sign removal), the Museum Gardens and North Street Gardens, for example - it is easy to judge subsequent, thoughtless degradation, but elsewhere it is not so easy.

Intrusive traffic signs are often of dubious value, they may insult our intelligence (7,8), they are commonly ignored, and responses to their injunctions go unmonitored.

Such signs are most offensive because highway authorities can introduce them without planning permission, even in the inner city conservation area. New mistakes can be simply avoided at no cost by subjecting all new traffic-related and other clutter proposals to an appraisal similar to that for proposed new shop signs. We hope the city will adopt this change, urgently, because (for instance) if a 25mph speed limit is adopted, it could be accompanied by a new forest of coloured lollipops. Old mistakes require tougher action. The key to all clutter is to see it in the context of our public realm and streetscape, our uniquely valuable asset.

So, the Trust encourages all its members to be alert to these issues, especially in the inner city Conservation Area. English Heritage and the WI's campaign urged everyone to audit street clutter and report it to their local authority. They offered a checklist (which can be downloaded from our website). Members might care to use it and send completed copies both to the Trust and to the City.

Sir Ron Cooke