A heavily-trafficked road in a down-at-heel area is transformed into a vibrant public space.

**Background & Objectives**

The Grassmarket is the largest open space in Edinburgh's Old Town and an important focal point to the south of the Royal Mile. It is one of the city's most dramatic urban spaces: a 210-metre long rectangle providing a spectacular prospect of the southern cliffs of the Castle Rock. The Grassmarket is included within the Old Town Conservation Area and the UNESCO inscribed Edinburgh Old and New Towns World Heritage Site. The primary aim of the project was the redistribution of space from vehicles to the pedestrian allowing flexible use for events such as markets, film shows, dance events and concert performances, and emphasizing the sense of place. Rising traffic levels and parked cars had led to decline in the quality of the space, exacerbated by anti-social behaviour associated with the night time economy.
It was recognised that there was an opportunity to reclaim the space for a wider range of users, develop the public realm into a more attractive environment, and implement transport measures that would ease the movement of people and traffic to and through the area. The quality of pedestrian experience could be enhanced, and the trend for binge drinking and its associated behaviours could be reversed by introducing daytime and evening activities attractive to all ages, and especially for families.

Implementation

The Grassmarket Project was prioritised in the Capital Streets programme in August 2004. The project involved the re-design of the streetscape to reinforce the historic and architectural character of the Grassmarket and measures to interpret key features in the physical design of the space with inscriptions on granite set attractively into the Caithness stone. In addition to the re-design of the immediate Grassmarket area, the area of open space adjacent to Granny’s Green Steps (an area of open space historically used by the local community for drying washing) was replanted and upgraded, and the Vennel (a ‘close’, a small street linking the Grassmarket to George Heriot’s school and the new Quartermile development) enhanced with steps and improved lighting providing a greater sense of security. These two improved links, facing each other on opposite sides of the Grassmarket, now link into an attractive pedestrian connection all the way from the south gate of Princes Street Gardens and the Castle, to Quartermile, and beyond to the Meadows park.

Special lighting features were installed and power sources are being introduced so that the Grassmarket can be used for events, such as the annual Jazz festival Mardi Gras and continental style markets.

The construction process maximised the re-use of paving materials which existed on the site. New materials were locally sourced. The project incorporates a simple design using traditional natural materials. This emphasises the historic enclosed form of the former medieval market place.

The project’s initial feasibility study was undertaken in 2004; procurement was carried out in 2007; and the Grassmarket project was constructed between late 2007 and March 2009. The total budget was £5.3 million.

Conclusions

The project has brought a range of environmental and economic benefits to the area, accompanied by a much improved transport strategy in the space. The pubs and cafes have embraced a more continental style of cafe culture, which complements the eclectic range of shops and hotels, and contributes to the economic development of the area. Designer boutiques sit side by side with vintage second hand shops, and arts and crafts stores. It has strengthened the ‘sense of place’ of the
Grassmarket within the city context.

Early indications suggest that the project has improved road safety considerably. In the three years prior to the scheme construction there were 13 road traffic accidents: nine involving pedestrians, one involving a bus and three involving a single vehicle. The available data (from the end of February 2009 to the end of December 2009) reveals there has been only one accident, involving slight personal injury to a pedestrian.

**Keywords**
mixed use developments
multi-functional area
pedestrian zones
street layout /design

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