

street space reallocation and the mediation of actor views



Photos: Robin Hickman

Aldgate Square - an attractive space to walk or cycle through, with some activity even in the early spring

Next time you are in London, take a walk down to Aldgate Square. The nearest Underground station is Aldgate; or even walk from Liverpool Street. On arrival, you will see the future of street planning – an interesting example of street space reallocation.

This is a former traffic gyratory, conceived and built in the 1960s, where cars, taxis, buses and goods vehicles could circulate the land and buildings in the centre of the roundabout, including the Saint Botolph without Aldgate church (beyond the city wall). The new Aldgate Square project has turned one arm of the gyratory into a public space, with

pedestrianisation and a through cycle route, and extensive landscaping. You may view it as a modest intervention, surely an easy one to develop – but the process of planning and implementation involved much complexity and generated an astounding range of different views.

The City of London has a mediaeval street layout, with small streets and lanes mixed with higher-capacity traffic routes. The network is unsuitable for high levels of traffic, but this has not stopped the streets from being filled with traffic and high levels of air pollution. Since the 1980s there has been a

gradual shift away from the car-orientated policies and projects of earlier decades. Motor traffic has been falling in the City since the 1990s, and only 5% of employees drive to work, with the vast majority (84%) using public transport.¹ Walking is the most dominant mode for movements within the City, with over 750,000 pedestrian journeys each day on City streets. Cycling accounts for a quarter of movements, with more on key routes at peak times.²

Hence this is a unique context – with difficult space constraints, high levels of public transport, walking and cycling, but still traffic congestion and many pedestrian and cycling conflicts with vehicles. The local communities and businesses are mostly supportive of efforts to improve walking, cycling and the public realm, perceiving this as the only effective way to maintain high levels of access and a high-quality built environment in the City.

Aldgate Square has become one of the most prominent projects in the City, gradually being planned and refined over the last ten years. The cost of the project was £24 million, largely funded by the City of London Corporation, Transport for London (TfL) and surrounding development. An intensive consultation process was utilised, initially considering problems and options, leading to project options and a preferred project that could be effectively implemented.

quality space for local residents, schoolchildren, office workers, and wider visitors to the area. There is a segregated cycle route north-south through the square. New landscaping has been included, including 70 new trees, drinking fountains, a water feature, and refurbished church gardens, giving spaces for residents and visitors to sit. The Portsoken Pavilion café has been built, providing a focal point and social activity in the square. This has been developed as a social enterprise, with its lease specifying that it is for community use and has to be open seven days a week. It provides a space for coffee and lunch, and also for community activities such as the local school chess club. The traffic changes for the square were introduced in late 2016 and much of the landscaping the following year, with the square and pavilion completed for the launch in July 2018.

So, we have a classic example of road space reallocation, of taking highway space away from the car and giving it back to pedestrians and cyclists. This is a project that can seemingly be replicated across many cities and neighbourhoods, of course with differing formats and solutions according to the context. But the project proved difficult to deliver, with many actors involved, including the local community, politicians, and different lobby groups – each with different views. The political economy of the project and the mediation of different views was more difficult to manage than the technical transport case, which was relatively straightforward.

We were interested in why this type of project is so difficult to develop, why there are so few of them around, how there can be such controversy in implementation – and how Aldgate Square was successfully implemented. To help understand these issues we interviewed a number of key actors involved in the implementation of the project.³ We considered the technical process of project planning and appraisal relative to the mediation of key actors and viewpoints. The following themes were explored.

Perceived problems and opportunities

As might be expected, there was broad agreement on the perceived problems in the Aldgate area, but even here there were some dissenting views from particular groups. There was a greater difference in views on potential solutions.

The vehicle mix on the gyratory included buses, taxis, private hire and a few private cars; alongside pedestrians and cyclists. Poor air quality around the school was a large concern, particularly in relation to the local schoolchildren. Pedestrians and cyclists were perceived as being given little dedicated provision and little space relative to volumes. Too

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The old one-way traffic gyratory was replaced with two-way traffic on Aldgate High Street, Middlesex Street and St Botolph Street – three arms of the gyratory. On the fourth, a new square was opened, forming one of the largest new public realm schemes in the City. This removed traffic from the area between the Saint Botolph without Aldgate church and Sir John Cass’s Foundation Primary School.

Aldgate Square (shown in the images on the previous and next pages) now provides a high-



The refurbished church gardens, providing a quiet place to sit and have lunch or read

much space was given to the 'inefficient' modes in space terms – the taxi and private car, which were running at low occupancy levels. These were not the dominant modes for movements into and within the City, but were given most space.

This led to a very poor environment for pedestrians and cyclists, and even for bus and car users due to the resulting congestion. The argument of efficient space uptake by different modes could be given more weight – with public transport, walking and cycling clearly more effective in delivering large volumes of people to a central urban area. Pedestrians were routed into subways, and cycling was expected to be carried out alongside the busy traffic. The poor environment had an effect on property values – for example, office rental values overlooking the gyratory were 20% lower relative to the rest of the City.

Some actors, however, had different views:

'Congestion is the main problem, resulting in increased journey times and increased fares – it only takes one road to close to cause gridlock. Traffic has to be freed up.'

Taxi organisation

'Pedestrians get lots of space; they have space on both sides of the road. The problem is that they

walk across the road and disrupt the traffic.'

Taxi organisation

'I don't think there is a safety issue – this is overplayed by the cycling lobby. Cycling is not economically important to the City, but the other traffic is. The economically significant traffic should be prioritised.'

Motorcycle action group

'Last year, three times as many motorcyclists died in London than cyclists – there is too much emphasis on cycling. TfL's priorities are wrong.'

Motorcycle action group

The taxi and motorcycle organisations hence argued strongly for retaining highway provision and improving vehicle flow, often with what might be seen as outlandish reasoning. Certainly they put forward viewpoints reflecting their own vested interests. Other actors supported an improved pedestrian environment, although there are differing views on the level and type of cycle provision required. TfL Buses gave support because of the benefits of improved bus journey reliability, while local communities wished to gain a public space

to use and interact, and local businesses were supportive of the improved public realm and working environment.

Perceived effectiveness and benefits of the project

The reworked Aldgate Square clearly gives much improved space for pedestrians and cyclists. The surrounding property values have recovered, with office rental values now at a similar level to the City average (although, of course, increased property values are not necessarily positive).

The impacts on the school are perhaps most remarkable. The new space is used by children when entering and leaving the school and also for visiting the church. This replaces the previous subway system, which was very unpleasant for pedestrians. Pre-2018, the primary school was one of the most heavily polluted schools in the country in terms of air quality, but this has now much improved:

'On the day of the opening of the square, children were running around on the grass and playing in the water fountains – as if it had been there forever [...] for some of the children this might be the only open green space they see [...] certainly there are more children staying in the square after school, playing with their friends.'

Primary school teacher

'The parents are very in favour of good air quality – and are very supportive of the project. The problem nowadays is playing in the water feature before school and getting wet – this was so popular that the water feature is now only turned on for use after school.'

Primary school teacher

However, not all views are so positive: *'We live in a very different world to five years ago – these are major traffic junctions and any changes impact on businesses. These street interventions affect our members and livelihoods [...] the redistribution of traffic doesn't work. The area that is pedestrianised is huge, so we are constantly sitting from one traffic light to another. It can easily cost £7 to go around the traffic system – try explaining that to a customer.'*

Taxi organisation

'Schemes like Aldgate displace traffic onto side roads – we should be allowed everywhere, on every road, just like the buses.'

Taxi organisation

'The focus for road projects should be road users. These are just vanity projects [...] they reduce road speeds and increase congestion and hence pollution.'

Motorcycle action group

Sanctioned discourse

The clear sanctioned discourse – the mainstream viewpoint that has developed concerning the project – was that more pedestrian provision and an improved public space was critical, and that the space should be available for all to use. But there were strong competing discourses, including the need to keep traffic moving and the importance of supporting the taxi trade. There are 25,000 black cabs and 50,000 private hire vehicles in London (now rising to 160,000 with the growth of Uber), hence this is a significant group of opinion to consider.

Decision-making and the participatory process

The project had a positive cost-benefit assessment (CBA), and a BCR (benefit-cost ratio) of 2:1. But this was not a process of assessment against CBA or even multi-criteria analysis, where the highest project option ratio would be preferred. Instead, the project was justified by considering a steady collection of views given to technical officers and politicians, gradually refining and shaping the project. A deliberative process of project development was followed – with the community groups given the evidence to help shape an effective project.

Funding the project was complex, with no one simple funding source available. The project cost increased from an initial £7 million, to £12 million, £17 million, and eventually £24 million as the scope grew in response to community aspirations. This rise in cost was difficult to justify and fund. Over 30 funding sources were used, such as the City of London Corporation (including off-street parking reserves), TfL, and Section 106 and Section 278 agreements with developers:

'In Aldgate there was never any major disagreement; the main problem was finding the funding sources and managing a complex project over a number of years.'

Politician, City of London Corporation

Perhaps the most important part of the project development was the intensive participatory process. For example, 18 months of consultation was used to identify what objectives the project needed to consider; this was then used to inform politicians on how their communities perceived the

problems in the area. Hence the starting point was not a pre-conceived project, but instead a process of consultation that helped to understand problems, improves understanding, and only then led onto potential solutions:

'Until people own the problem, they will never own the solution [...] the community has to be ready to accept what is being shown to them.'

Traffic engineer, City of London Corporation

'We were asked to think what we would want, but also what other users would want [...] the children were allowed to suggest what they wanted – but the facilities had to be available for all groups.'

Primary school teacher

This stands in contrast to many projects that start with a preferred end product, and the process is then used to justify this. Even a perceived token acceptance of a project can break down as problems arise and adverse opinions become dominant. Hence the process involved developing a set of people to champion the project, who could also support the politicians when the process became difficult. This iterative process meant that the project which was finally implemented had a close alignment to what people requested and supported, and there are clear benefits for most of the different populations groups in the community.

But, again, there were dissenting views, particularly where solutions were not supported:

'They do consultations, but I'm not sure anyone bothers to fill them in.'

Taxi organisation

A close look at the development of a streetscape reallocation project such as Aldgate Square shows the complexities involved in implementation, and offers insights concerning why these projects are difficult to pursue. There are many varied views on projects, sometimes from people pursuing very isolated agendas and particular vested interests. These all need to be mediated throughout the project planning process. Often a project can be hijacked by dissenting views, even of the outlandish variety. Think of the success rate of consultancy projects going onto implementation – it is very low.

Project development is hence much more than a technical process, and involves the negotiation of very different viewpoints. The political economy of project development is important – involving the effective mediation of different actor views. A common understanding of problems needs to be developed, leading to project options and a project

that receives strong support. The participation has to be wide, but also the project promoter has to be brave enough to pursue interesting and innovative projects. The dissenting views need to be overlooked – putting on the hard hats where necessary – where they are not consistent with the vision for the area.

Look around in London and elsewhere, and there are too few of these types of projects around. Perhaps we can be more successful in giving much-needed street space back to the pedestrians and cyclists by strengthening our participatory processes and improving the funding sources. The task is to find the sanctioned discourse and, in this case, to walk and cycle with it.

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Notes

- 1 Based on 2011 Census data
- 2 *City Streets: Transport for a Changing Square Mile. City of London Transport Strategy: Draft for Consultation.* City of London Corporation, Nov. 2018. www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/services/transport-and-streets/Pages/transport-strategy.aspx
- 3 Interviewees included transport planners and engineers from the City of London Corporation and Transport for London; the local school and church; the wider local community; local businesses; taxi, motorcycle and cycling lobby groups; and local politicians