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## THE BLUE CARPET, NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE: A CASE STUDY OF PUBLIC REALM DESIGN DECISION MAKING FROM A USER PERSPECTIVE

### *The Issue*

The Blue Carpet is a public open space in Newcastle city centre, adjacent to a Listed art gallery and various other private and public commercial buildings. It was completed in 2002. It is potentially important as a resting place for shoppers or workers in their lunch hour within the busy commercial area of Newcastle, especially as Newcastle city centre is relatively short of public open space. It is, however, little used for this purpose despite provision of seating. Rather it is a space people pass through to get somewhere else – not the original intention.

Despite an ideas competition for the space, led by Newcastle City Council's (NCC) division of Planning and Transportation (NCC,1996) with the involvement of the Design Research Centre at Sheffield Hallam university on materials used, and the engagement of an artist, Thomas Heatherwick, it has not captured the imagination of local people or visitors as a place to linger.

The £1.64m space, 300m wide, funded by the Arts Lottery Fund, European Improvement Fund and NCC, is laid out to appear as a carpet loosely laid down on the space with edges curled up, and seats uncurling from within the carpet with fluorescent lighting below to encourage night time use. Seven large street trees are incorporated. The surface material is recycled blue glass in resin with brass trim (set in 22,500 tiles), but the blue colour almost immediately began to fade to an uneven grey to light blue, and that now leads many to ask why the word blue is applied to the space (Pickford Jones, T, 2004).

The implications of this apparent project failure for public realm design policy and practice deserve consideration. Analysis of the decision making process from initial concept or strategy through implementation to evaluation can usefully feed in to future policy.

### *Background to the concept*

NCC had initially identified the space (previously largely road area) in the 1990s as a site for enhancement as part of a regeneration scheme for the area, without any detail regarding the nature of this enhancement other than reference to artwork. The Angel of the North public artwork had recently been erected in Gateshead and had greatly helped regeneration of Gateshead. This appeared to influence the council in promoting artwork as a panacea without much thought about its context in urban design terms. Hence the design competition (promoted through the Artists Newsletter) was sparked by an initial budget for an artwork for the space and this only evolved into a design for the whole space once the competition was underway (Morland, 2000). Some design guidelines were eventually produced by NCC for the purpose of the competition. These included references to durability of materials, the need to take account of the materials palette already used in the city centre, access for all and the desirability of reflecting the line of the Town Wall and the site of Carlisle Tower that lie through and adjacent to the space (publicartonline, 2008)

### *Implementation of the project*

The competition winning designer gradually took over the leadership of the project once appointed and met with a group of local businesses and residents periodically throughout the design and

implementation of the project. There was no public consultation prior to the design competition except one public opinion survey by NCC in 1997 (Morland, 2000). The track record of the artist included a wide range of projects including a Harvey Nichols window display and the world's first bridge made entirely of glass (Tammes, 2005). The project team however included a number of NCC professionals including highway and lighting engineers, landscape architects and quantity surveyors as well as the researchers at Sheffield Hallam. Many public realm projects are managed by one of the built environment professionals within the LPA but NCC was not involved as closely as it might have been, and appeared to lose overall control of the implementation stage.

Throughout the project many expressed concerns including a Newcastle University engineer who claimed the blue tiles would not withstand a north east winter. Clearly such concerns were ignored. (Herbert, 2001)

### *Evaluations of the project*

Some early evaluations of the Blue Carpet project were more favourable than later ones, albeit these early ones took the form of little known awards. In 2002, while the Carpet was still blue in colour, the project won the Local Government News Street Design Award, and the project team received honours in a London ceremony from the Worshipful Company of Paviments (Northern Echo, 27.09.02). A few years on local news reports of the project referred to complaints of escalating costs and maintenance problems, together with some vandalism and the fading blue colour (Young, 2006).

Another early indication of problems with the use of the space is the fact that NCC put in place a bye-law to prohibit skateboarders in 2003. With the space being little used generally skateboarders appeared to seize the opportunity to dominate the space briefly, and that in turn was perceived by NCC as a nuisance and further deterrent of wider use.

Two more recent, and more authoritative, evaluations are considered below – that of CABI, and secondly that of Newcastle and Gateshead Councils (GC) writing jointly in a recent place framework for the area covered by both Councils.

CABI (2011) includes an evaluation of the Blue Carpet on its archived web site and it generally praises the designer. CABI claims it is well used at lunch time and that there is a carnival atmosphere at night. Also CABI states that there are few problems of wear or weathering, although they do point out that the space is not easy to maintain as only the artist can supply replacement parts. CABI concludes "Arguably what a city like Newcastle needs is not just one square designed with this degree of flair and attention, but a whole series of spaces". Whilst making a valid point about designing a series of spaces in a coherent way, to select the Blue Carpet as an exemplar is perhaps misplaced.

A contrasting view is put forward by NCC and GC (2010) in an analysis of their open spaces, categorising them into high, medium and low quality. The Blue Carpet has been identified as medium quality. It is described as unique and distinctive but problematic in terms of maintenance, especially the cost of replacement materials. Significantly it is noted that the space is mainly used as a through route rather than a space to spend time in. Insufficient seating with poor positioning (not grouped in a sociable way), together with lack of activity in the interior of the space, as well as mainly inactive frontages of the surrounding buildings, all combine to deter usage of the space.

NCC and GC note that the space has much potential due to the adjacent art gallery and new city library. However there is no discussion on how to develop this potential, or any reflection on how this potential failed to be realised when the space was conceived. Nor has there been any public opinion survey on the use or appearance of the space.

Neither CABE nor NCC/GC evaluations of the project consider the way in which the original brief and objectives for the design competition may have influenced the success of the space. The fact that the initial idea was driven by the perceived link between artwork and regeneration, with the high profile Angel of the North having been recently installed, may have overshadowed a more holistic approach to the space in an urban design sense. The appointment of an artist as project leader reinforced the artwork as a driver. Whilst incorporation of artwork within an urban open space can positively enhance it, there may be a tension between considering the space as a setting for artwork and considering the space in a more multifaceted manner, including diversity of uses as well as relationship to surrounding buildings and the sequence of existing city centre spaces. The lack of clear focus from the outset could partly explain why the space has neither fully succeeded as an artwork or as an open space.

#### *Retrospective lessons from the Blue Carpet from a user perspective*

In retrospect the Blue Carpet open space could have been improved from a user perspective through earlier and more thorough consultation with potential users, including local businesses and residents. Views on ways to introduce activity in the space could have been sought, including more active frontages to surrounding buildings. With the exception of the art gallery, and very recently one café, the surrounding buildings are not currently in leisure, retail or café/restaurant use so making the task of seeking active frontages more difficult, but a front extension for a further café use in association with an existing building society use, for example, might be appropriate. Attention to the interior of the space which currently appears empty could provide a focus for activity and shelter from the weather. A well designed glass enclosure to accommodate leisure and/or restaurant/café uses and act as a focal point within the space might meet this challenge. Such a building could also provide a stronger connection between the art gallery and the space, so unifying the space with its context, especially if it could house some minor exhibitions. Finally additional, robust, seating positioned with sociability in mind could encourage the use of the space as a rest area or lunch time stop. The original “access for all” intention in the competition guidelines could be addressed better if the seating had back and arm supports for the infirm, as well as some tactile surface materials to assist those with sight problems. Greater local distinctiveness could have been achieved through incorporating reference to the archaeology mentioned in the original guidelines, perhaps by indicating the line of the Town Wall with a change in surface material. Incorporation of some materials used elsewhere in the city could have assisted too, whilst still allowing for an innovative design overall.

#### *Wider lessons for public realm design policy*

Innovative public realm design is to be applauded, but only if it helps generate use of a space. Too much focus on aesthetic details without reference to context can detract from potential use issues. Experimentation with little used materials on a large scale can be inadvisable, especially from a maintenance viewpoint. Appropriate seating and some activity is essential in ensuring high levels of

use of a space. Active ground level building frontages to the space encourage use, especially if there can be spillage into the open space.

In terms of process any proposed new public realm spaces should follow a character analysis of the area to help ensure that local distinctiveness is recognised and built upon. An open space or public realm strategy is also desirable to help address issues such as the optimum distribution and quantity of open space, as well as its purpose, and whether the spaces might play a unifying role over a wider urban area, so reinforcing a local sense of identity. There should at least be a clear link between character appraisals and development or competition briefs for individual sites – this was not in evidence with the Blue Carpet. Finally strong project leadership is required, with minimal staff changes, to help ensure original concepts or strategies are implemented as intended.

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