

REIMAGINING BLACKSTAFF SQUARE

A Vision for Making Successful Public Space in the Linen Quarter



FINAL DRAFT



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Linen Quarter BID

The Linen Quarter BID is an independent not for profit placemaking company that focuses on improving the Linen Quarter district as a place to work, live and invest in. The BID was democratically elected for a five-year term, starting in February 2018, and is governed by a Board of Directors drawn from local organisations across the area. The BID's mandate was extended for another five years after a re-ballot in January 2023.

OGU Architects

OGU are a dynamic and innovative practice who work primarily with socially conscious clients and local communities to improve public places and buildings through careful research, material quality and meaningful collaboration. The majority of OGU's projects have been for local authorities, public bodies, charities, community groups, business owners & traders associations. The practice works at various scales from temporary interventions and research in public space, to public buildings, and large scale strategic urban design work investigating pieces of towns and cities.

OGU were recently one of five practices selected by the RIBA Journal as 'Future Winners' (highlighting innovative practices set up in the last 10 years) and this year the Adelaide Street Project was shortlisted for a McEwen Award, Pineapple (Public Space Category) and was the overall winner of the Architects Journal Small Projects Award.

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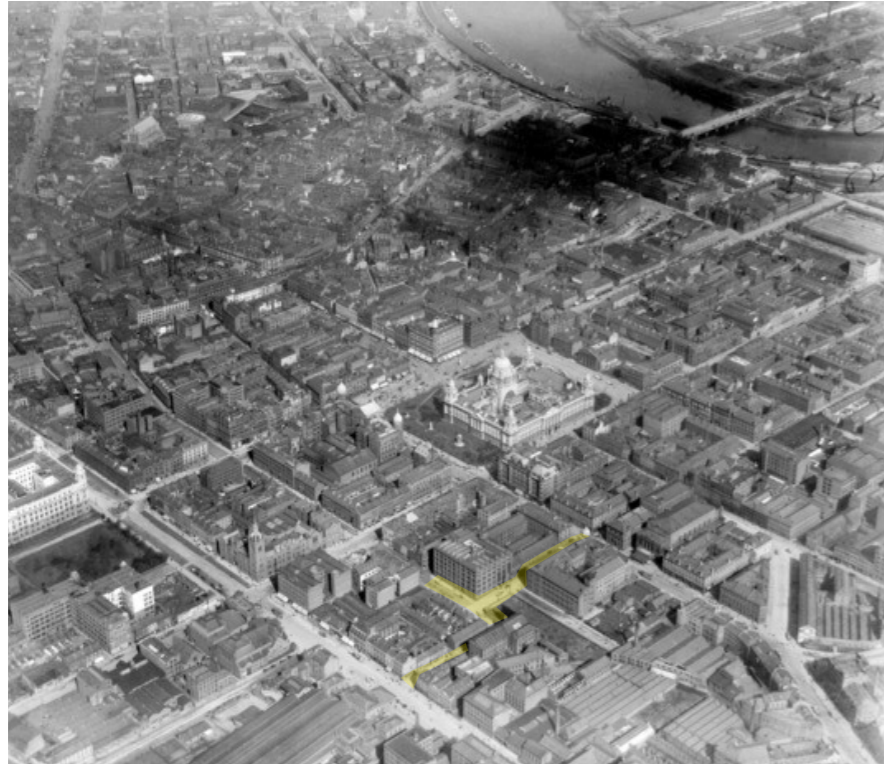
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Introduction



Context of Work

Blackstaff Square has been noted by various public bodies, business groups + other stakeholders as requiring improvement on a number of levels. It is in this context that Linen Quarter BID have been engaging and exploring what might be possible with the square over the last number of years. With recent developments and new buildings being constructed - the square has considerable potential which is not currently being realised.

OGU Architects were commissioned in April 2022 to explore options for progressing the development of Blackstaff Square. Engagement work and further survey responses were provided in June 2023. This work has since developed in the context of feeding into the work associated with Streets Ahead 05 being brought forward.

Intention of Work

The work on Blackstaff Square has developed into a research piece exploring how the square might be redeveloped to create a successful public space, used throughout the day which would support business and be a lively place for residents, workers and visitors.

It should be noted that this work is not a final proposal and is proposed as a summary of findings during a year-long period of research. The team hope that this distilled summary of the research displayed in diagrams and 3d visualisations help to push the conversation about what a high quality square in Belfast could look like.

Context

Like many cities across the world people in Belfast have been utilising their public and outdoor space in increasing amounts in recent years. Businesses in Belfast are becoming better at activating and utilising outdoor public space. The Blackstaff Square redevelopment is a chance to focus on how public realm improvements can support existing and new businesses, residents, and visitors in making a safe pleasant environment to be.

The work investigates squares in a Northern European context with similar weather to Belfast . It summarises common approaches and tries these 'shoes' on the feet of Blackstaff Square. Belfast has very few genuinely pedestrian priority public spaces and few high quality public squares which are functioning well throughout the day. With careful consideration, design and engagement, Blackstaff Square could benefit better from several thousand people moving through it each day. Visualisations show the potential for the square (and the city) if people are prioritised to increase footfall and give Belfast a successful public space, utilised throughout the day.



Diagram: Public Spaces of Belfast: Diagram
(Charlotte Henrich, Queens University School of Architecture)

Site Location

Blackstaff Square occupies a key position along the route between Great Victoria Street, Transport Hubs (existing and forthcoming) and the commercial district of the Linen Quarter.

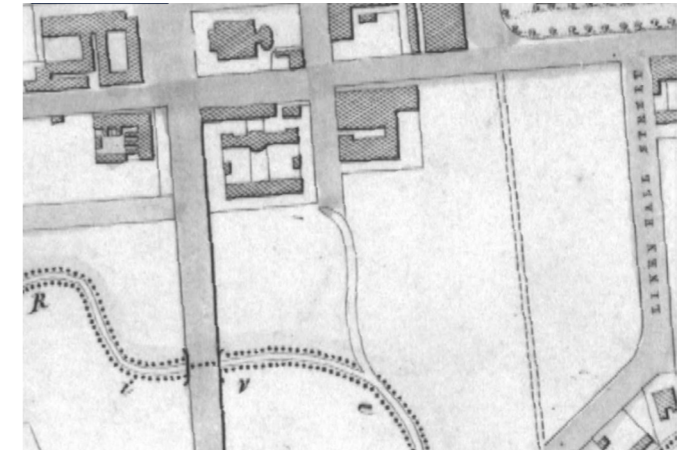
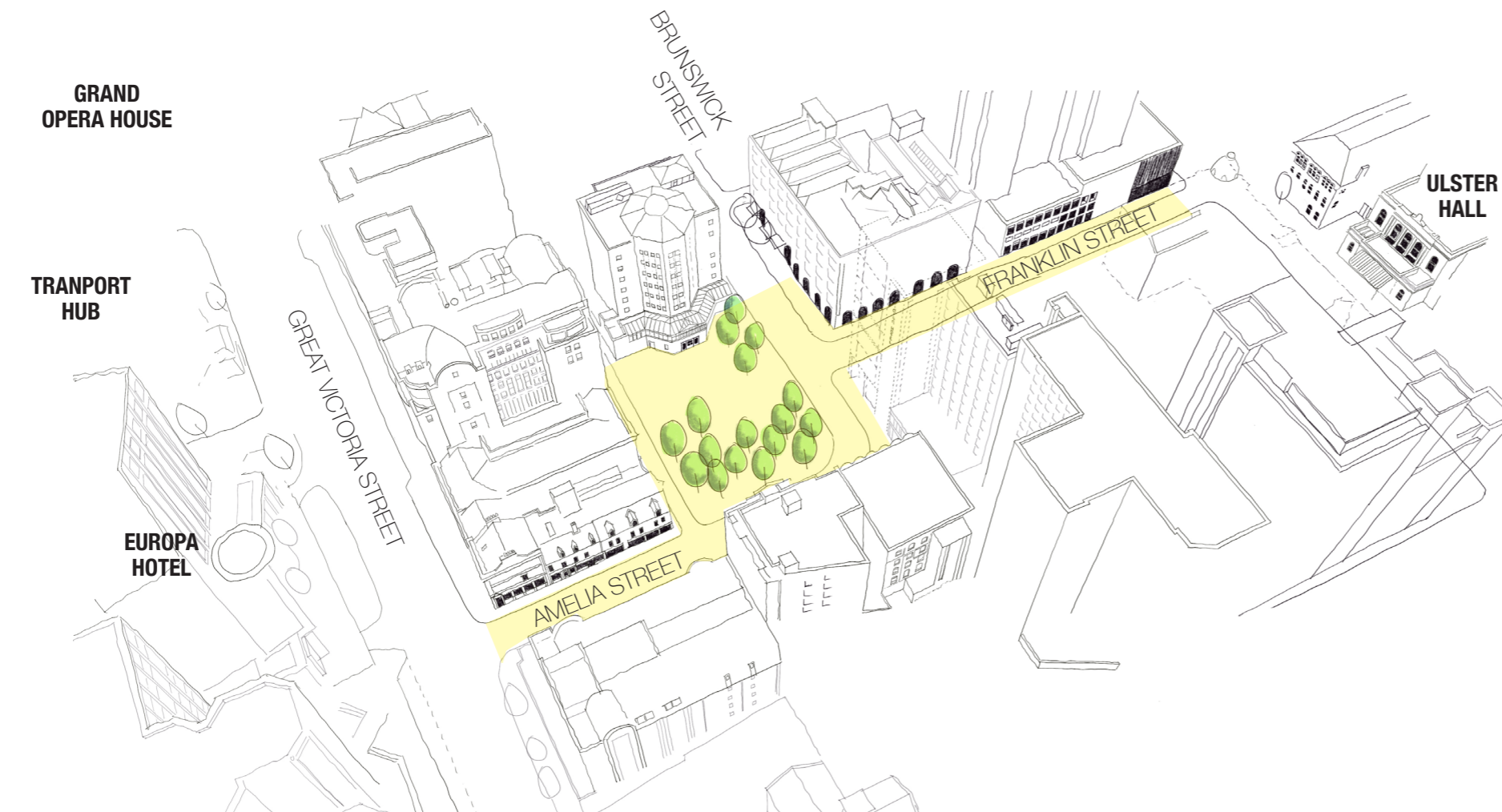
The square is located in close proximity to an increasing range of offices and commercial premises, new student residences, hotels and cultural venues that attract large numbers of visitors - like the Ulster Hall and Opera House.

The square is named after the now culverted Blackstaff river which runs close by. The Blackstaff River is a partial translation of Abhainn Bhearacha 'the river of the stakes' - in reference to the blackened oak stakes of the supporting bridge/causeway somewhere near the mouth of the river.

The square is a relatively recent addition to the city centre, constructed following redevelopment of a WWII bomb site. As it is new square the edges have not yet fully developed with some historic 'backs' of buildings 'fronting' onto it - this is a particular issue on Keylands Place.

However, more buildings are beginning to react and enliven its edges. Recent hotel development and city centre student living mean there is more overlooking and life at night.

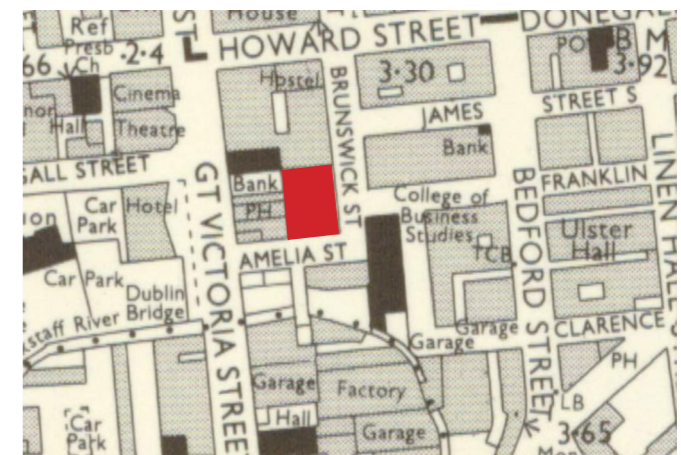
A consolidated approach to activating and expanding the edges of would help in developing it to become a much more lively and safe asset at the heart city centre for workers, visitors and residents.



1832-1846
Blackstaff River entering the edge of Central Belfast (with bridge crossing at Great Victoria Street)



1919-1963
Rail terminus, Hippodrome and Opera House visible on Great Victoria Street, Blackstaff Square doesn't exist.



1957-1986
Blackstaff Square visible in its current form after the war

Existing Issues

Blackstaff Square is well located with potential to be an excellent public space for the city. However, it currently has a number of issues which need to be considered as part of any redesign work:

Lack of Edges + Active Frontages (WWII Bomb Site)

Formed as part of the redevelopment of a WWII bomb site, some of the sides did not historically 'front' onto the square. Considering how the buildings on Keylands Place are serviced whilst providing an inviting edge to the square has never been fully resolved to provide a well used presence along what could be the busiest edge of the square.

Wayfinding + Footfall

The success of the square depends on footfall and the routes through. The routes through and directions into the square are not clear which reduces footfall. Increasing pedestrian traffic through the square would have a significant impact for local businesses. The gateway points are very important in this regard. If you were a visitor to the city would you naturally be drawn through Amelia Street, Franklin Street or Brunswick Street into the square?

Vehicle Conflicts

Existing vehicle movements result in conflicts with pedestrians and limit the use of many parts of the square. A small number of parked cars often result in poorly utilised sides of the square during the day.

Deliveries, Servicing + Bins

Businesses need deliveries + servicing and this is not in question. However, the current arrangement could better support the use of the square in a safe way for other users of the square. Deliveries

and bins affect the area throughout the day rather than being consolidated into a more specific period like the most successful public squares. There are a multitude of cities of the scale of Belfast who are doing this much better and it is something the city must rectify if public space and streets are to be better quality and help support the businesses along them. Businesses benefit from high quality streets and public spaces like Blackstaff Square.

Street Clutter

Parts of the square suffer from an uncoordinated approach to the design and arrangement of elements - this can sometimes result in 'street clutter' and reduce visibility.

Safety & Passive Surveillance

Parts of the square feel secluded and without natural surveillance. Increasing footfall and use throughout the day and night will help.

Materials

It is widely accepted that the existing Blackstaff Square materials are getting towards the end of their lifespan. The 'Streets Ahead' programme offers an opportunity to take a high quality sustainable approach to improving the area.

Accessibility

Making public space accessible in the city centre is important. More consideration needs to be given to less able bodied or visually impaired users.



Photo: Keylands Place looking towards Amelia Street

Lack of Daytime Use

The square is not well used during the day. If it is to be successful it needs to be a more pleasant place to be during the day.

Lack of Quality Covered Space

There is a lack of quality covered space. A consolidated approach with high quality design would be beneficial and give the square a visual identity.

Design Quality

The design quality and subtle definition of space is fundamental. The square should be of a quality which is appropriate to its position at the heart of the city Centre. The quality of the square should promote use and footfall as well as stimulate development and investment for the businesses at it's perimeter.

What makes a good Square?



Photo: Using the edges of buildings to enliven public space.

Many Northern European cities with similar climates to ours have far better public squares. This did not happen by chance - it required engagement, investment and support for high quality design. There are some common themes in successful squares.

People Prioritised over Vehicles

In a good square the safety and experience of people is prioritised over those of vehicles. Vehicle movements are carefully considered to service businesses at agreed times to support the larger number of pedestrians using the space.

Active Edges

Businesses provide quality edges with activity and space to sit out. People attract people, so the active edges drive footfall.

Sightlines + Safety

A lack of clutter and clear sightlines help to provide passive

surveillance and encourage the feeling of safety throughout the day. The perception of safety supports footfall and business.

Uses throughout the Day and Night

The best squares are used throughout the day and night. People walking along and through increase safety.

Children are Safe

A good sign of a square that is functioning well is that parents are happy for children to run around - it should be noted there are very few of these spaces in Belfast.

Servicing and Maintenance Consolidated

Think of your favourite public square to spend time (maybe this was on holiday). In all of the best squares, the periods when the businesses are serviced are consolidated so that people and businesses can benefit from their safe use without vehicle conflicts. Approaches to servicing and maintenance need to be improved city wide. It is fundamental to successful public space.



Photo: Shared surface example, New Road Brighton (Jan Gehl Architects)



Photo: Inviting edges to city streets and squares, Copenhagen (www.2030palette.org)

Good Squares Support Business

Research shows that vibrant public squares are places that people want to be and walk past. This footfall helps to support the businesses around them.

High Quality Design + Materials with Longevity

High quality design is reflected in good quality materials which are hard wearing and last for years. The design quality extends to consideration of long term servicing and repairs of utilities.

Spaces to Stay/ Dwell

People are attracted by other people. A successful public square is one where you move slowly through and want to stay. Research shows that people stay longer in better quality public space - this obviously has associated benefits for the businesses who operate around high quality public spaces.

Amelia Street | Gateway to Blackstaff Square



Photo: Existing Amelia Street Road Condition

Approach

1. Amelia Street acts as an inviting gateway to the Square with seating, planting & pavement cafes spilling out onto the street.
2. The movements of pedestrians are prioritised.
3. Signage and views through encourage people to use the route, increasing footfall and supporting businesses along Amelia Street and into Blackstaff Square.
4. Planted edge boundaries provide spaces for pavement cafes to support the local bars and eateries, adding activity to the route.
5. The image is shown in the context of the forthcoming changes to the transport hub with existing overspill taxi rank shifted. A taxi rank is designated as part of the new transport hub and it is our view that a taxi rank should be allocated for the Linen Quarter at Brunswick Street/ James Street South supported by easy dropoff at McClintock/ Franklin Street.



3d Visualisation: Image demonstrating how Amelia Street could draw people through into Blackstaff Square and become a livelier public space in its own right. This would support footfall and support business throughout the day.

Blackstaff Square | Active Edges



Photo: Existing Condition of the edges of the Square on Amelia Street.

Approach

6. The shared surface extends the square to the edges of the buildings to expand the size of the public space of the square.
7. Daytime uses and events are encouraged - this image shows the square with a Sunday morning flower market taking place - extending the use of the square. Public space which is busy throughout the day feels safe and encourages people to stay longer, & support local businesses as well as being a more interesting place to work beside, walk through & visit.
8. The majority of the square remains public
9. The edges of the square become a place for businesses to spill out onto (with deliveries and access for business maintained, during consolidated hours). A high quality busy square encourages footfall and supports business.
10. Trees and planting are maintained and sustainable urban drainage integrated in the design.
11. Natural stone finishes provide high quality and easily maintained hard wearing surfaces for the next 50+ years.



3d Visualisation: Visual demonstrating how providing active edges to the full extent of the square makes it a more interesting place to work beside, visit and walk through. A high quality successful public square supports investment and regeneration in this area.

Keylands Place | Extending the Square for Business



Photo: Existing Keylands Place

Approach

The square is designed to best support businesses with inviting entrances + active uses whilst allowing deliveries + service vehicles at appropriate times. It is key that the design of Keylands place creates an active edge to the square otherwise Blackstaff will never reach its full potential.

- 12. Consolidated approach by DfC/ Dfl results in subtle delineations of shared surface extend the square over to the businesses on Keylands place - making a useable activated edge.
- 13. Like all good squares, coordinated servicing and associated vehicle movements are designed to allow for active inviting edges to animate the square and support the businesses on its perimeter. Vehicle movements would be designed to safely loop through the square (at appropriate times).
- 14. A consolidated approach to the design of commercial spaces reduces the visual clutter and makes for a much more pleasant space to spend time. The amount of external space can expand



3d Visualisation: Visual demonstrating the advantage to business if the shared surface of the square extends across Keylands Place. People walking past are much more likely to stop off and support the businesses fronting onto the square. Vehicle movements for deliveries/ servicing are designed to work in this context . The intention is that all sides of Blackstaff Square will begin to have active lively uses supporting the regeneration of the area.

- and contract depending on requirements of business.
- 15. On the Amelia Street side of the square, traffic movements

delineated in more subtle ways so that the movements of people are prioritised in a safe way - see examples overleaf.

Pavilion | Daytime Uses



Photo: Existing View of Square through to Amelia House

Approach

16. A new kiosk helps to provide a covered space and focal point, whilst making for a livelier place during the day. The structure is lit at night and can be seen from Great Victoria Street helping to draw people through sides streets, and encouraging perception of safety at night. The space supports other businesses in the area by increasing the range of users in the square.
17. The staff at the kiosk help to extend the active presence on the square throughout the day & night, making it feel safer and encouraging use.
18. Sightlines are maintained to allow businesses fronting onto the space including bars, restaurants and hotels to overlook the square.



3d Visualisation: Visual demonstrating how a covered space & kiosk would help generate activity during the day. The vast majority of the square remains public.

Brunswick Street | New Entrance + Covered Space



Photo: Existing Brunswick Street Entrance

Notes

- 19. Signage to encourage Brunswick Street as an entrance to the redeveloped Blackstaff Square (with sightlines maintained).
- 20. Covered spaces provided to extend the use of the outdoor space throughout the year. Sightlines and access to various buildings are maintained. Permeability and sightlines are important to the perception of safety for users of the square - particularly at night.
- 21. The edges of buildings contribute to the lively feel of the square as a place encouraging people to stop off or making it your preferred route when crossing this part of the city. The additional footfall helps to support various businesses in the area.



3d Visualisation: Visualisation showing a consolidated approach to covered space and the seating on the edges of buildings which makes for a pleasant pedestrian route to support businesses fronting onto and close by the Blackstaff Square.

Conclusions + Summary of Approach

Create Belfast's Best Square

Blackstaff Square has huge potential to be a very active central public space in Belfast. Recent developments of hotels, student residents and various existing & new businesses, bars, cafes, restaurants have the potential to activate the edges of a successful square.

Consolidated Multi-agency approach

The design requires a consolidated approach between DfC and DfI if it is to function as a square with appropriate edges.

Prioritise the Experience of People to Support Business

A more subtle approach to traffic movements allows for a much improved experience for pedestrians. The best public squares function for people as their primary users and do not have vehicles other than deliveries + servicing. Research shows that the design supporting public space for hundreds of people walking past is much more lucrative to most businesses than a small number of car parking spaces. This research needs to be fundamental to the design.

Signage at Entrances

Signage at entrances provides a visual marker to pedestrians to walk through off adjacent streets into the square - marking the space for those new to the city.

Amelia Street becomes a Gateway Street

The design of Amelia street rebalances the movements of vehicles to provide outdoor space to Brennans' and the Crown Bar . A lively new street encourages pedestrians and visitors into the square off Great Victoria Street helping to support the businesses along and near the square.

Extend the Square

The area has similar density of hotels, bars and restaurants to the Cathedral Quarter and a large lively square could develop here. The 'one square' approach to Keylands Place and Amelia street with a consolidated shared surface will increase the capacity of the square by providing ~1180 m2 of additional public rather than vehicular space.

Keylands Place opens out to Square

A shared surface incorporates Keylands Place into the square whilst retaining servicing and deliveries during consolidated periods. It no longer feels like a service road and is a positive entrance to a vibrant public space supporting the businesses fronting onto it.

Consolidated Approach to Deliveries + Servicing

A smarter approach to waste management and servicing is needed to unlock the potential of public space across Belfast. A new approach to deliveries, bins + servicing should be designed to prioritise footfall and patrons of businesses. This approach is taken in all successful city centre public spaces across the world (even in the most awkward medieval streets or by the boats servicing Venice) - it is key to the quality of public space in the city developing.

Dedicated Coach Parking + Taxi Rank

Dedicated coach parking + taxi rank supports new hotels and businesses in the area.

24/7 Use + Nighttime Economy

Successful squares around the world are lively and feel safe throughout the day night time. Recent developments will help in



Photo: New Road Brighton (Jan Gehl Architects)
'Traffic levels have dropped by 93%, the number of pedestrians has increased by 62%, and there has been a massive 600% increase in lingering activities. People apparently enjoy being here. Today 86% would like to see more areas like New Road in their city.'

this developing part of Belfast. A well designed multi-functional urban square which allows a range of additional uses like flower markets or music will supplement the space and put it on the mental map of the city for day and nighttime use

High Quality Design + Materials

The design and materials should be high quality to help encourage footfall and support businesses, new residents and visitors in the hotel. The natural stone finishes will be sustainable and low maintenance (wearing for a great many years).



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