

'Meet Me at the Left Lion': Encounters within Nottingham's Old Market Square

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Abstract: Architecture can form the structure for internal or external gathering places, however, geographer Doreen Massey defines places, not by their physical characteristics, but as the points of interconnecting flows of people, goods, communications, memories, and imagination, positing that all places are meeting places. At the heart of the city centre, Nottingham's Old Market Square is where the local inhabitants go to work and play; protest, mourn and celebrate. It is a place of formal and informal encounters, where friends and acquaintances meet, by chance or design; where strangers might exchange a glance or a few words; where people watch other people. Originally a shared market place for Saxon and Norman settlements, the earliest maps of the city show that the footprint of the square has remained the same for many hundreds of years, though its design and edge have gone through numerous transformations. The latest remodelling was undertaken by internationally renowned landscape architecture practice Gustafson Porter: unveiled in 2007, it has won a raft of awards including the inaugural RIBA CABE Public Space Award. Drawing on work undertaken with architecture students to explore individual experiences of the square, the paper will outline some of the flows, past and present, as well as the physical elements, which contribute to the square's success as a place of encounter.

Keywords: Meeting Place, Public Space, Old Market Square, Nottingham, Encounter, Sense of Place, Placemaking

Introduction

THIS PAPER SETS out to explore why Nottingham's Old Market Square is a successful place of encounter, through the use of a combination of lenses – theoretical (Massey, 1991), design-focused (Gehl, 2004), experiential (student study) - to examine the case study in different ways.

Firstly, the ideas of Massey and Gehl are outlined and the study undertaken with students described. Secondly, Massey's theory is applied to examine how sense of place has evolved over time on the site. Finally, experience of the square is explored via the student study, in the light of the ideas of Massey and Gehl.

Massey

The effects of globalisation are widely seen as negative: a tidal wave of homogenization sweeping away all traces of local and national identity (Robertson & Khondker, 1998, p28). Ideas about 'placelessness' (Relph, 1976) and 'non-place' (Augé, 1995) illustrate the fear of the erosion of place, which is traditionally thought of as a centre of meaning linked to an 'authentic' way of dwelling; historically and physically rooted, static, and somehow threatened by mobility (Cresswell, 2004, pp59-61).

The 1991 paper by geographer, Doreen Massey, ‘A Global Sense of Place’ suggests instead that ‘what gives a place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus’. She posited a new definition of place as ‘...progressive; not self-enclosing and defensive, but outward looking ... adequate to this era of time-space compression’. These relations are described as flows - of people, goods, communications, memories and imagination – which interconnect at a given place, leading to the assertion that places are processes and all places are meeting places. This network of flows reaches across a large proportion of the planet, and different social groups and individuals are placed in relation to it in very distinct ways, leading to the statement that: ‘places do not have single, unique ‘identities’; they are full of internal conflicts’ (Massey & Jess, 1995, p70).

Gehl

Based in Copenhagen since the early 1960s, architect Jan Gehl’s extensive research into the development of the public realm has resulted in a pragmatic approach to design, with a strong emphasis on sociability, evidenced by his design-focused checklist of what makes a place (Gehl, 2004, p5) (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Gehl (2004) - Check List of What Makes a Place

Protection against:	
1	traffc and accidents
2	crime and violence
3	unpleasant sense experiences
Comfort – possibilities for:	
4	walking
5	standing / staying
6	sitting
7	seeing
8	hearing / talking
9	play / unfolding / activities
Enjoyment	
10	scale (human)
11	possibilities for enjoying positive aspects of climate
12	aesthetic quality / positive sense-experience

Gehl (1987) states that walking should be made easy through level surfaces and direct routes, observing that people will tend to detour only around large obstacles, often choosing the most direct route over the safest. He further suggests that there should be places to stay, stand and sit. For standing, there is a need for places around the edge, with supports such as

columns, trees or niches. Seats are also preferred around the edge of a space and should be comfortable for older users, and a combination of primary and secondary seating is effective. The positioning of supports and seating in relation to shelter (from wind, noise etc), sun / shade will work with or against the climate and affect the positive sense experience.

Design can affect the amount of contact between people within a space: it is encouraged by no walls, short distances between people, low speeds, one level, and face-to-face orientation; it is discouraged by the opposite: walls, long distances, high speeds, multiple levels and back-to-back orientation.

Gehl categorizes activities into: *necessary*, *optional* and *resultant* (social). Social (*resultant*) activities depend on other people being in a place, whether active (eg playing, conversing) or passive (eg people watching). In low quality places only *necessary* activities take place. In high quality places *necessary* activities take longer, and a range of *optional* activities take place as the environment is pleasant to be in.

Student Study

A study was undertaken with second year BArchitcture students as part of a precedents study of public urban open spaces for a master planning project. The group was set a number of tasks to explore Old Market Square as users (see figure 2), with responses used by the author to investigate the square's sense of place.

Tasks were designed to be non-directive in terms of content, but to encourage a personal response based on first hand observation and experience. It was hoped that the combination of writing and images would produce a rounded response, linked to place theory categories (Canter, 1977, p160-1) as well as providing differently-skilled students with opportunity to employ more than one means to communicate.

Maps and diagrams have been used to explore mental mapping processes (Lynch, 1960; Canter, 1977) and as a means of identifying the main elements of a given place (Canter, 1977, p160). Drawing pictures has also been used as a starting point to explore the emotional relationship with home (Cooper Marcus, 1995). It was anticipated that the making of images may result in a more intuitive response than the written tasks.

The Twenty Statement Test was developed by Kuhn & McPartland (1954) as a tool to identify categories of personal identity. It was used here to elicit a structured response and in an attempt to identify categories of identity of Old Market Square, in part to see if they would map to Relph's (1976) three-fold description of place, which comprises physical conditions, activities and meaning, with sense of place being greater than the sum of the parts.

Content analysis revealed that the tasks together solicited a more detailed and judicious response than any one would have done singly.

Figure 2: The Tasks Undertaken by the Students

1	Spend at least 20 minutes observing in Old Market Square and record your observations. Log the day, time, weather and temperature (mild, very cold etc).
2	Write 20 statements you believe to be true of Old Market Square. Each statement must start ‘Old Market Square is...’.
3	Create one image to communicate what you feel is the essence of Old Market Square. Give the image a title and write a short explanation of the image.
4	Write 200+ words to describe your experience(s) of Old Market Square.

Applying Massey’s Theory of a Global Sense of Place

With a population of nearly 300,000 (Nottingham City Council, 2008), Nottingham is located at the centre of the UK, approximately 100 miles (175 km) north of London. At the heart of the compact city centre is the Old Market Square, but in order to understand the square as a place, it is necessary to look beyond its immediate and obvious boundaries, and examine it in the context of the city and country, as well as the rest of the world.

Nottingham is testament to the fows of conquest within the British Isles: its old name, Snotingeham, is of Saxon¹ origin and the original castle was constructed in 1068 at the order of the Norman², William the Conqueror. Its current population reflects the waves of largely economic immigrants to the UK in more recent centuries.

The ability of a settlement to function as a node in a network, with links to other settlements, was originally dependent on its geographical location. Nottingham’s Saxon and Norman peoples situated their settlements on two defendable hills close to the River Trent which was navigable, thus facilitating trade, which was well established by the mid 17th century.

A local invention - the 1589 stocking frame - was responsible for the booming 17th century silk stocking industry (Beckett, 2006, pp158). Woollen stockings were also produced, and another factor in the town’s manufacturing success was the use of wool from a local breed of sheep which produced a particularly strong worsted (twisted thread) (Henson, 1970, pp57-8). However, despite the fact that Britain was the frst industrialised nation, exporting technical processes and machinery, during the 18th and 19th centuries Nottingham’s textile industries also benefited from technologies imported from Holland, Germany and the USA.

Between 1730 and 1745 many hosiery manufacturers relocated their production from London to Nottingham, and by 1754 43% of the town’s trade was textile related (Beckett, 2006, pp141-2 & 160). In the late 18th century and throughout the 19th century, Nottingham amassed considerable wealth thanks to its textiles industries, frst hosiery, and later its spin off trade, the manufacture of lace.

By the time Queen Victoria ascended the throne in 1837³, the British Empire was the largest and most powerful the world had ever seen, encompassing one ffth of the world’s land and one quarter of its population (Steel, 2008, p250). The UK drew in materials from its subject countries, processed them and exported them, and just as there was a fow of

¹ Germanic tribes who frst invaded Britain in around 410AD.
² Invaded from northern France in 1066.
³ The Victorian period spans 1837-1901.

materials and goods, so there was a flow of people and ideas, accelerated by the telegraph and steam ship. Both hosiery and lace producers imported yarns and exported the finished products around the world, and, despite market fluctuations caused by wars abroad, monies generated by the lace trade in particular funded much rebuilding of the city centre during the late Victorian period (Harwood, 2008, p13).

Old Market Square – Historical Framework

Pre-Victorian buildings are to be found in the area surrounding Old Market Square, though the city has little architecture from before 1600. From the late 17th century and into the 18th, it was no longer acceptable to build in local vernacular styles, but to evidence taste through the use of the latest Dutch or Italian fashion, ornamented with classical details and incorporating the latest features, such as sash windows (Beckett, 2006, p116). Nottingham trained architects did most of the remodelling of the commercial centre during the late 19th century, much of it in Northern Renaissance style, referencing the architecture of Bruges or Antwerp (Harwood, 2008, p18-9).

The earliest description of the topography of Nottingham dates from the 1540s and praises the size, clean paving and buildings of the square, describing it as ‘the most fairest without exception of al Inghlande’ (Beckett, 2006, p108). Many early descriptions of the market place make reference to its size, hardly surprising given that it is one of the largest in the UK. It is also one of the oldest: the site of the shared Saxon/Norman ‘Saturday’ market, in the dip between the two hill-top settlements, trading began there in 1155 and continued for 800 years.

The earliest detailed map of 1609 shows the shape of the square as it is today (Beckett, 2006, p109) however, it has gone through several incarnations. Early features were mainly practical elements of the market, including a low wall to separate livestock from the other goods on sale. In 1718 the market square was paved with river boulders, and in the 1720s a New Exchange was built at the East end of the square (Beckett, 2006, p124).

The buildings edging the square evidence a process of building and rebuilding and date from between 1871 and 1966, although the ghost of the medieval townscape is present in those which retain narrow façades and shared alleyways, remnants of burgage plots (Harwood, 2008, pp 76 & 79). Therefore, the architectural framework which bounds the public space has remained unchanged for 40 years, although some of the buildings’ uses have changed over time, reflected in changed frontages. It is a reminder of and link to the city’s past, and provides an active edge which contributes to the square’s success, offering more reasons for people to go there (Project for Public Spaces, 2005).

T.C. Howitt’s 1929 neo-classical Council House is the most prominent building on the square and includes two stone lion statues flanking the steps, one of which – the left lion - is a traditional meeting place. His square was equally formal in its design, and was renamed from simply the market place to Old Market Square (Harwood, 2008, p75). Given protection through listed status in 1994, by the beginning of the 21st century it was approaching the end of its life: drab, tired looking, poorly lit and unwelcoming, it was widely known to locals as ‘slab square’ (Nottingham City Council, 2003a, p4).

Old Market Square – Gustafson Porter Design

In October 2003, Nottingham City Council launched an international, open competition to redesign the square. The competition brief described Nottingham as ‘a modernising, international city, of international significance and importance’, and called for a ‘public realm of excellence’ which would both respect the city’s history and heritage, and reinforce Nottingham’s ‘identity’ and ‘achieve a sense of place’ (Nottingham City Council, 2003a). It aspired to create, in the words of Council Leader Jon Collins ‘one of the most impressive public spaces in Europe’ (Nottingham City Council, 2003b, p4). Opened in April 2007, the scheme by Neil Porter of internationally acclaimed landscape architecture practice Gustafson Porter, was constructed at a cost of £7 million.

In their winning entry, Gustafson Porter (2004) state that the contemporary design responds subtly to the context of the square: colours were chosen to blend with the surrounding building facades, and a number of historical elements were used to inform the design. Angel Row, the street leading off the square to the north west, takes its name from an inn which had marked the entrance to the medieval city: this generated the idea of a safe haven, and gave the design of the square its name: ‘the Guardian of the City’. A ‘dynamic’ line across the square, derived from the boundary to corral livestock in the medieval market, was interpreted as a water channel, later commuted to a drainage channel for practical reasons. Also the tiers of the water feature, which suggest a system of water purification, reference the 16th century system of pumps and reservoirs required to provide the city’s inhabitants with fresh water.

Since opening, the square has won eight awards, including the inaugural RIBA⁴ CABA⁵ Public Space Award, but is this a true measure of success? Perhaps a more realistic indication is to be found in its use, or lack of; something a strong design statement cannot guarantee (Project for Public Spaces website).

Experiential Study

The study with BArchitecture students was undertaken in January 2008, ten months after the new design was unveiled. The student responses were found to map clearly to Relph’s (1976) three-fold description of place; in particular, the twenty statements produced by the group as a whole (16 students) could be categorized equally into physical conditions, activities and meaning. However, for the purpose of this paper, the responses will be examined in the light of the design-focused checklist of what makes a place developed by Gehl (2004), as shown in figure 1, and theories of place presented by Massey, with a particular focus on encounter and meeting.

Gehl: Protection

Gehl’s checklist calls for ‘protection against: traffic and accidents; crime and violence; [and] unpleasant sense experiences’.

A number of students mentioned that much of Old Market Square is car free, the strongest point about the benefits of pedestrianisation being: ‘the restricted access for vehicles makes

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Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment.

it seem like more of a place for people...'. The square's function of convenient transport hub was also commented upon: buses and taxis run along the west side, as do the trams which continue along the south side, where the stops are.

A number of students of both sexes felt that the square is safe. This is perhaps particularly relevant coming from students native to the city who commented that the square feels safer than previously because it is more used. The one student who described it as 'intimidating to cross alone' is male. The square benefits from CCTV as well as natural surveillance, as seen in figure 3, which portrays how the city might be seen by the rest of the country as a result of bad press it suffered for a period of time prior to the study. One female student explained: 'at night I pass through market square as a scenic route to the Pit and Pendulum [pub], as I am not normally alone I feel safe. I can see where people are, and there are usually police on patrol in the area'.



Figure 3: 'What Nottingham is Famous For'

Most students focused on the visual aspects of the design, though one wrote of the smells of the square as well as the sense of time related to the chiming of the Council House clock, and the bells of the regular trams, although the water feature is very effective at drowning out the sounds of the various vehicles in the vicinity.

Accounts of positive experiences of the square in summer abounded, as did those of more limited use during the winter, linked to descriptions of the square as large, cold and exposed. In the words of one: 'in summer I have enjoyed spending time with friends and sitting down in the sun, whereas in winter the square is just a place I pass by or walk through...'

A stronger reaction was: ‘the expanse isn’t a pleasant place to walk across on a cold winter day due to the sense of isolation, exposure and vulnerability experience[d] as you feel as though all eyes are on you’, as illustrated by the same student in figure 4.



Figure 4: Untitled Student Image

Gehl: Comfort

Gehl identified that for a place to be comfortable, there must be ‘possibilities for: walking; standing / staying; sitting; seeing; hearing / talking; play / unfolding / activities’.

The design is open and uncluttered: a sunken central area⁶ was removed and levels manipulated to enable easy flows of movement across the square (eight roads lead into the square) without recourse to steps. Student responses made numerous references to the practicalities of the design in terms of its accessibility, ease of navigation and multifunctional nature. It was described as ‘a thoroughfare’ with a ‘never ending flow of people’.

Most of the seating is located around the edges of the square and is a combination of primary and secondary. The main area of seating comprises stone steps with a row of seats with backs at the top of the fight, although one student wrote that it was ‘uncomfortable to sit [there] for prolonged periods of time’. A rail running alongside the north edge of the water feature has an angled top, at a comfortable height for most able bodied adults to lean on.

The biggest design statement of Old Market Square is the water feature. With an area of 4,400 square metres (Anon, 2007, p78), it comprises a refectation pool, a dry landing, a row of fibre optic lit jets and a water plane. All students, bar one, were positive about the water feature, and its interactive nature was highlighted in several accounts, including: ‘in warmer weather children play in the fountains’ and: ‘...the way people are strangely drawn to the water feature intrigues me. Although they can walk round it quicker, they decided to go through it, a testament to the accidental or intentional interactive design’.

⁶ Working as part of the Gustafson Porter team, Space Syntax carried out a survey of the existing square and found that 78% of people within the square did not use the sunken central area, and of those needing to cross the square diagonally, 30% circumnavigated the sunken area, rather than walk through it (Space Syntax, 2004, p3).

Another student referred to the discovery of optical illusions: ‘...from where I was sat (near the fowerbeds) when people walked or stood behind the fountains (on the Market Street side) it appeared that they were waist deep in them’.

Activities cited by the students included meeting, sitting, people watching, passing through en route elsewhere (walking, cycling and using public transport), working, shopping, dining, busking, dog walking, playing, jogging. Descriptions included: ‘it is an attractive space for meeting, promenading and watching the world’; ‘the people ... use the space to sit [and] talk’; ‘the seating areas provide good view points ... if you’re just passing you can sit down and relax for a while [and] take in the view of ... those in a hurry pass by...’. Figures 5, 6 and 7 show people in groups and alone, undertaking different activities in the square.

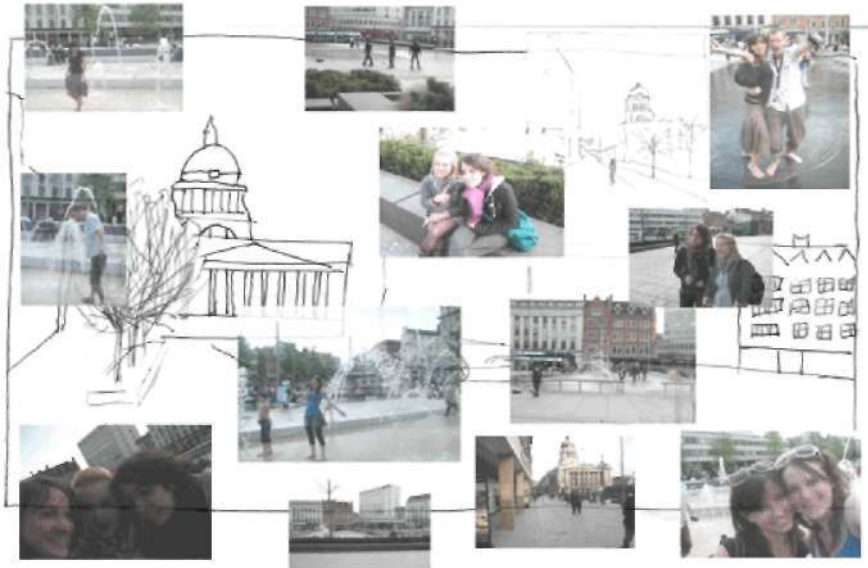


Figure 5: Untitled Student Image



HUSTLE m BUSIF

Figure 6: 'Hustle and Bustle'

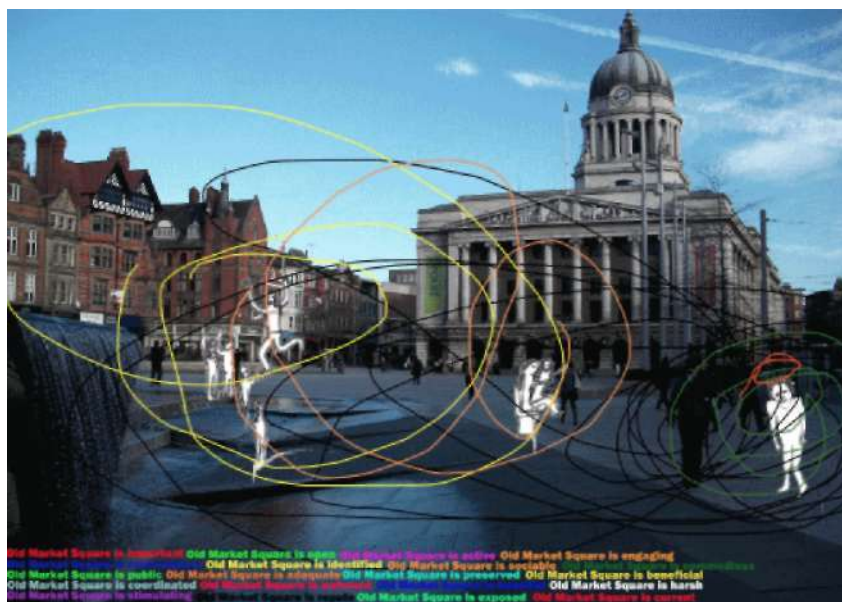


Figure 7: Untitled Student Image

One student observed:

People use the spaces of market square in different ways, there was a busker sat on the fower bed edge facing the shopping arcades, whilst people wanting to interact privately tended to face the fountains. People waited for others by the Council House or opposite the Subway [sandwich shop] on the north east corner ... before moving on or sitting near the fountains.

She continued, recounting her own experiences:

I have experienced trying and failing to avoid the dreaded people with clip-boards, who pounce on passers by, and try to guilt-trip money out of them, or bombard them with a series of seemingly pointless and irrelevant questions. I have had fun inventing various ways of getting away from them, why should I give a stranger my name and address, even if they have a badge?

There was a shared feeling that the year round use of the square could be increased, but this might happen over time given that good quality places can result in sometimes unpredicted usage (Gehl and Gemzoe, 2004, p35). There was also agreement that the space benefits from organized events which include a regular farmers' market, concerts and seasonal installations such as a big wheel in the winter and a beach in the summer. The simple and fexible new design enables such happenings to take place in the level area outside the Council House, facilitated by an electrical grid installed under the paving and street lights designed to support sound systems.

From the responses it was clear that some students had chosen only to observe such events, whilst others had participated more actively, as in this example:

...before Christmas time, there was an ice skating [rink] ... I arranged with my friends and we went there. We had a great time and lots of fun there. It was so nice playing in the open area with a view of [the] tram, people passing by, and buildings surround[ing] it.

Gehl: Enjoyment

Gehl states that for a place to be enjoyable it must be to human scale and provide 'possibilities for enjoying positive aspects of [the] climate; aesthetic quality / positive sense-experience'.

Although the square is large and open, there are smaller more intimate areas in and around the water feature, and along the area of south facing seating and planting, where face to face interaction is facilitated.

As a group, the students used a range of experiential adjectives, mainly positive, to describe the square. Some described it as 'quiet' or 'calm', others as 'noisy', 'exhausting', or 'lively'. One student's 'vast' is another student's 'spacious'. Regarding the aesthetics of the design, there was a mixed response: some said they love it, others hate it, but perhaps the only thing that this proves is that it is not possible to please everyone.

Students identified the opportunity for both shared and individual experiences, whilst one made the pertinent point that experiences vary for the individual from visit to visit:

Sometimes you become immersed in the sociable experiences Other times it can have the opposite effect, the prying eyes, multiple discussions and wavering hand gestures you fail to be stimulated by the active nature of the place as you were once before.

The responses given by the students indicate their role of observer or participant, or a combination. Some accounts are written from the view point of one role, but suggest another eg one student wrote as an observer, but the vitality of her writing would suggest it is informed by experience as a participant. The level of engagement varies from regular *optional* use to *necessary* use only, and includes both passive and active *resultant* activities (Gehl, 1987), illustrating different categories of meeting and encounter.

Massey: Interconnecting Flows which Create Place

The individual experiences of the square illustrate some of the fows which meet there. As well as providing identifiable places to meet by arrangement – by the water feature, at the left lion - the new design of the square makes it physically and psychologically accessible, facilitates the fows of pedestrians and encourages many kinds of interaction.

The design responds both to historical fows within the site and fows of influence within the international design world. The imagination of the designer has created a place which can stimulate unstructured, spontaneous and playful use – perhaps this could be described as a fow between designer and users - enabling *resultant* activities - fows between different users.

Flows of capital and goods are evidenced around the edge of the square which is populated by national and international businesses. The square was described by students variously as a ‘pit of commerce’, ‘ravaged by international chains’ and a place to experience ‘pleasure through consumption’. Sometimes these fows move into the square itself when markets are in operation.

The Council’s desire to state the city’s and square’s international and national status – its role as a node in an international network - was not reflected in student responses, though some did include more general terms about projecting importance, such as ‘legend’, ‘place of impression’, ‘boastful’, a ‘stage’, and ‘well known’. Neither were global influences commented upon greatly, other than indirectly through the ‘palette of historical architectural styles’ and specifically through reference to the neo-classical architecture of the Council House and the presence of international chain stores.

The examples above demonstrate fows of communication: of speech and body language; the targeted communication of advertising; that which the City Council aims to project to its citizens and beyond; communication through time, as demonstrated in the words of one student: ‘[in the square] it was as if reading a message which explained who the people of Nottingham were past and present’.

Historically Old Market Square has also been the stage for the expression of shared public sentiment. It was the venue for a commemorative service for football manager, Brian Clough; where fowers were placed to mourn Princess Diana’s death; the parade route for political rallies, winning sporting teams and, in December 2007, the 2nd Battalion Mercian Regiment, granted the freedom of the city, on its return from service in Afghanistan.

Such ephemeral inhabitations add to the meaning the square holds within the collective consciousness of the city, but every individual will garner a different constellation of

memories and experiences related to it, from both before and after the new design was realized, as illustrated by the following quotes:

Last summer me and some friends had been on a picnic and on our way home we passed through the square and walked through the fountain. James was soaked and it was nice and refreshing to paddle.

I got asked to buy ‘The Big Issue’⁷ from the homeless man normally standing on the corner of High Street at 9.30 one night, even politely replying with ‘no thanks’ may get a comment of gratitude for not being ignorant.

I will ... remember it as where Brian Clough and the Nottingham Forest team he won the European Cup with lifted the Trophy to thousands of fans when they returned from the match (see figure 8).



Figure 8: ‘Old Meeting Place’

Conclusion

A combination of ‘lenses’ - theoretical, design-focused, experiential – would appear to provide a holistic way to explore and evaluate a given place. Although there is overlap and intersection in terms of what each lens identifies, each has a particular focus which serves to compliment the others. Applied to Nottingham’s Old Market Square, such an approach

⁷ A magazine sold by homeless people as a means of legally earning money.

facilitates the identification of the many different aspects which contribute to its sense of place and success as a place of encounter.

The student study evidences multiple experiences on offer in the square; the fact that people experience places in different ways; and that some elements of sense of place, particularly in terms of meaning, are shared whilst others are personal.

The fact that the Gustafson Porter design addresses most of Gehl's design-focused checklist would appear to indicate that it is a pleasant place in which to be. This is backed up by the increase in use from its former incarnation and the fact that people use it for *necessary* and *optional* activities, leading to *resultant* activities.

The application of Massey's theories reveals the square as palimpsest: the embodiment of many different fows, local and global, which have intersected at that location over time to create a unique identity, which contributes to its attraction as a place go.

In the square today, one walks across granite paving from China and Portugal where once bears were baited and miscreants were put in the stocks, past buildings of Portland stone, local red brick, glazed tiles, concrete. One can withdraw money from banks with international reach and influence, and spend it on locally grown vegetables, Italian pizza or on coffee from a well known café chain, based in the USA, which sources its products from three different continents.

'Guarded by lions', Nottingham's Old Market Square is where the local inhabitants go to work and play; protest, mourn and celebrate. It is a place of formal and informal encounters, where friends and acquaintances meet, by chance or design; where strangers exchange a glance or a few words; where people watch other people. It is a place of many meetings; a rich place of encounter.

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About the Author

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With backgrounds in both jewellery design and landscape architecture, over the last 13 years I have taught on a range of undergraduate programmes including Architecture, Landscape and Interior Design, and Decorative Arts. Informed by a love of travel, my research interests are place and place making, particularly within the urban realm. Although a confirmed city dweller, I have a passion for nature and enjoy walking in the countryside, both in the UK and abroad.