

ON THE WAY –

FROM MILTON ROAD TO OUR CITY STREETS

Kieran Perkins, an architect and urban designer at 5th Studio, is evoking the potential of the City Deal to turn a traffic artery into a beautiful place

WORDS KIERAN PERKINS

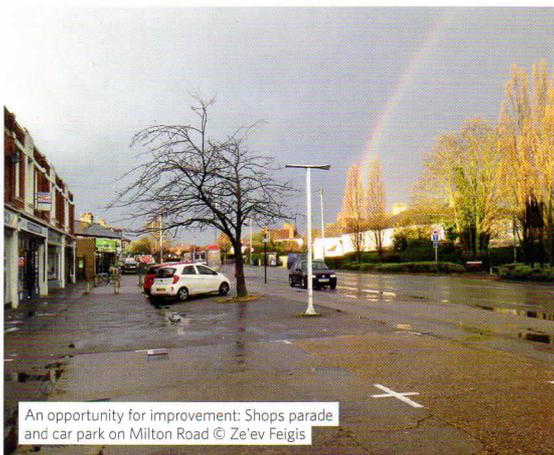
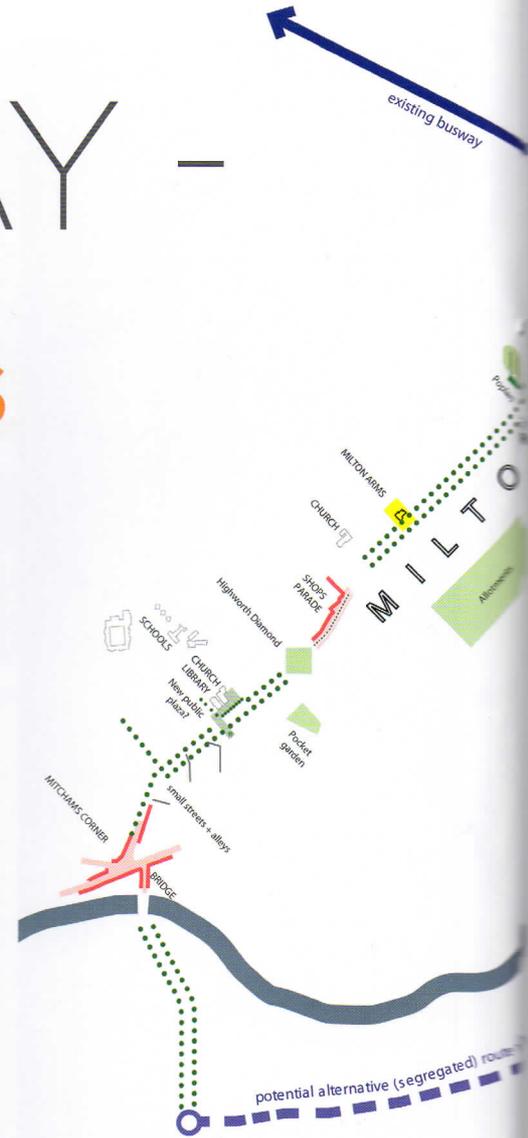
We, the people of Cambridge, are remarkably inconsistent in our attitude to the city's urban environment. We talk a great deal about the beauty and preciousness of its historic fabric, and hotly debate the merits, or otherwise, of new buildings, yet we delegate responsibility for the appearance and function of the most public parts of our city – its streets – to highway engineers. Highway engineers, of course, do an important job, but they ought not to be expected, on their own, to create good – let alone beautiful – places.

Movement is the lifeblood of cities, but the faster and simpler that movement is, the more anti-social and anti-urban it tends to be. While things have improved since the gyratory

at Mitcham's Corner or the Elizabeth Way roundabout, new highway infrastructure is still too often crude and overbearing.

As City Deal transport schemes gear up, and with the Milton Road consultation project already causing controversy, it seems like a good moment to ask if highway engineers' design teams have the full range of skills necessary to deliver good places, as well as functional infrastructure.

The initial work completed for Milton Road seems to dismiss complexity at the first opportunity. The existing conditions are reduced, not very convincingly, to red/amber/green designations. A hierarchy of priorities is defined, apparently without testing or debate,



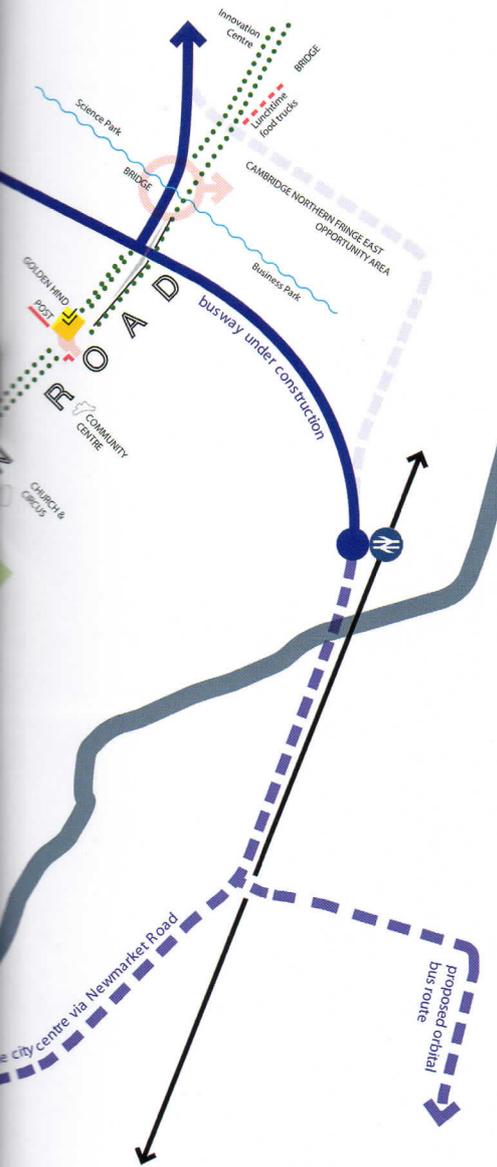
An opportunity for improvement: Shops parade and car park on Milton Road © Ze'ev Feigis



A good example for street improvements: Remodeling of Passeig de St Joan, Barcelona by Lola Domènech © Adrià Goula



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Unique moments and opportunities along Milton Road
© Kieran Perkins

followed by the adoption of a supposedly 'optimal' street cross-section with little justification. This formulaic and utilitarian approach has, predictably, aroused dismay among the residents, with the loss of existing trees first of many concerns. Between the top-down bus-priority project and the bottom-up reaction, a more fertile middle-ground has been neglected.

Good architects generally start a project by working with the client to refine the brief, and understanding the context in depth before

Planting Plan, Remodeling of Passeig de St Joan, Barcelona © Lola Domènech
Example for a good design of a street as a tree lined urban landscape.

acting. In this case, a broader development of the scheme's objectives - with inputs from a wide range of specialists and stakeholders - might have opened up other ideas to be explored ahead of the design proposals.

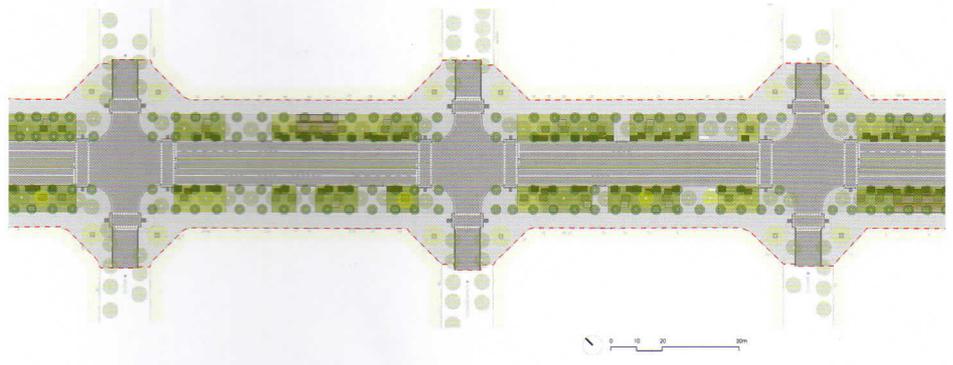
So what might that mean?

Well, what if, alongside developing a 'typical cross-section', the team also examined 'unique moments' along the road, so that the character and function of each stretch can be understood as a place, rather than a continuous linear route of uniform character?

Perhaps, with the right design skills on the team, an approach to renewing the streetscape could be developed to provide a sense of continuity - a pleasant, tree-lined approach to the town centre - while also supporting and celebrating the diverse qualities and use of different sections.

What if there was sustainability input, which highlighted planting as an important response to the changing climate, providing better water management and protection from rain or sun, while also helping reduce pollution effects and screening the road from neighbouring properties?

And, what if, through understanding how Cambridge's whole busway network would work once complete, it became clear that bus-priority need not necessarily be at the top of the hierarchy of objectives for Milton Road? Projects are progressing despite there being no robust, overarching plan for transport across the city, which could prove costly, both financially and in terms of opportunities missed.



The value of this project can and must exceed that of simply speeding up bus journeys

Successful schemes around the world show the importance of clarity and comfort in encouraging people onto public transport. If an attractive and popular city-wide network is to be established around Cambridge, a wider vision for the visual identity and operation of a coherent and easy-to-use public transport system needs to be developed.

And finally, what if the City Deal employed an architect to champion and coordinate these various aspects - from strategy down to the detail of bus stops - as the city of Luxembourg has done with its Luxtram project, or as Transport for London does? Negotiating and organising multiple strands of thinking is central to what good architects do, and part of our ethos is a belief that architecture's real disciplinary power comes from its ability to engage with complexity, rather than suppressing or fragmenting it into multiple specialisms or single-issue responses.

The value of this project can and must exceed that of simply speeding up bus journeys - which leaves me wondering: how can the team manage without the synthesis and spatial intelligence that an architect might bring?

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