

Less is more

Transport consultant Ben Hamilton Baillie wants to clear the roads of white lines and barriers separating pedestrians from traffic. Interview by Christina Taylor.

A tabled amendment to the road safety bill proposes the removal of white lines to indicate a reduction from the 30mph urban speed limit to 20mph (NCE last week). The move comes hot on the heels of experiments such as the successful removal of street signs in London's Exhibition Road, along which sit Imperial College and the Science, Natural History and Victoria & Albert Museums.

If successful, the amendment could see Britain edge closer to the kind of traffic management strategies practised in northern Europe.

"There is a surge of interest in road safety and a realisation that the quality of the public realm can attract investment to those areas," says urban design and transport movement consultant Ben Hamilton Baillie. And he argues that the removal of lines, signage and street furniture paradoxically improves safety, as without clearly defined spaces for different road users, all behave more cautiously.

Hamilton Baillie is one of the UK's foremost proponents of a "shared space", a concept rooted in ideas pioneered in the Netherlands which aims to improve road safety and traffic management by "integrating people and cars in the street".

"Over the last 20 years there have been around 20 schemes [in the Netherlands] that turn assumptions about road safety on their head," he says. "They use contextual human response and eye contact to achieve road safety and free flow."

Consultant to English Heritage

for its *Streets for All* guidebook and *Save our Streets* campaign, Hamilton Baillie believes that, in the face of relentlessly high road accident rates, shared space is a philosophy whose time has come. Judging by the 79% support for removing white lines shown by the 500 engineers responding to last week's NCE news poll, it seems to have considerable civils support.

Hamilton Baillie developed an interest in street design and management during his architecture degree course at Cambridge.

"One of the things that struck me is that 80% of the public realm is designed by traffic engineers," he says.

After completing his diploma in 1980, he moved to Bristol and spent 14 years working in public housing. "I was in charge of a £30M development programme, trying to replace some of the worst tower blocks."

Hamilton Baillie hit his 40th birthday and "suddenly I felt like a change" so he resigned his job to explore other avenues. Luck played a part in his next moves. Hamilton Baillie stumbled upon cycling campaign group Sustrans' offices, picked up a brochure detailing its proposal for a new national cycle network and immediately offered his services. Five demanding but enjoyable years cycling around Wales and south west England planning cycle routes followed.

"It was a lovely job but very physical," he says. "I was handling up to 500 land deals at a time, working with 61 local authorities

and doing a lot of engineering and landscape design to make the routes memorable," he says.

By 1995, Hamilton Baillie was again hankering for a change, and set off to explore urban street design. A Winston Churchill Trust grant for foreign studies gave him the chance to spend eight weeks in Holland, Denmark, Germany and Sweden studying urban traffic control and calming with some of the pioneers of "home zone" design.

The experience has inspired him ever since.

Hamilton Baillie has been an independent consultant since 2004 and now divides his time working in northern Europe and as a consultant to UK highway authorities and for developers.

"What I'd love to see is the whole traffic engineering profession combine with urban design so that designs use the environmental context to influence behaviour," he says.

