

Is Edinburgh on the Road to Nowhere?

The state of our city centre streets is regarded as the visual identification of a public domain in decline.

Potholes have steadily risen as a topic of political debate, with the Starmer government hoping to address the “pothole plague” in its policy document The Plan for Change.

Roads and pavements are part of a city’s streetscape, the visual elements of a street, including the road, pavements and street furniture. The condition of this greatly defines the “visual identity of a neighbourhood”. In a historic city centre such as Edinburgh, this is a particularly live issue.

The state of Edinburgh streetscape and heritage was the focus of an engaging public discussion **On the Road to Nowhere? Edinburgh’s Streetscape and Heritage Places**, organised by the [Cockburn Association](#) and held at Augustine United Church on Thursday.

The event was addressed by Terry Levinthal and Richard from the Cockburn Association, Fiona Rankin from Edinburgh World Heritage along with two University of Edinburgh students who have conducted an in-depth study of the city centre, Alex Robb from Spokes, and David Hunter from Living Streets Edinburgh, with an extended audience discussion at the end.



On the way, the 29 bus had travelled up Frederick Street. The state of the road here has been a cause of much recent consternation, although the newly laid tarmac has simply replaced the worn out tarmac laid several years before. Nobody has yet addressed the repairs required to the setts, simply opting to cover the offending surface over once again.

The state of the setts causes buses and other vehicles to judder violently as they passed up it. The road has recently been smoothed out, with a new strip of tarmac placed over it. This is pretty unsightly, though is believed to be a temporary measure.

Fully resetting the street will be a substantial project, similar to that now going on in the Lawnmarket, although reference was made to the newish setts laid on Howe Street which were not laid down with traditional methods. There is an amount of cement in between the stones. The situation on

Frederick Street is an example of the way the condition of the streets impacts the feel and look of an area. For many, such examples are evidence of a city not what it used to be. Such declinist narratives are common in public debates about the city.



Lawnmarket © 2025 Martin McAdam



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Not what it should be

The general sense of the event was that Edinburgh's streetscape was well short of what it should be. That it was well short of what should be expected in a historic city centre – and particularly one which has World Heritage status. The view articulated by a number of speakers was that the state of the streetscape could best be improved by focusing on maintenance and small, focused projects, rather than some of the big 'sexy' projects which generally attracted money and media attention.

Whether or not these big projects come to fruition is a matter of debate but it was later explained that this model is a reflection of the way the funding works – the council has to apply for funding for specific projects rather than one pot of money to split up how it would like.

After an introduction by Terry Levinthal, Richard Price, the

interim chair of the Cockburn Association, showed a range of photos evidence of several recent streetscape “stushies”, including that over the “[concrete ramp](#) in the internationally significant Charlotte Square”. It was worth making the effort to improve, and he suggested that if the streetscape is good “people look more positively on places”.

For Price, it was often very small stuff like clutter and other “detritus strewn on the streets” that had a substantial visual impact. Though there were many aspects of the Edinburgh streetscape needing attention, he was not in despair. He also looked back at previous Cockburn Association events such as the “City for Sale” discussion attended by 800 people discussing the then proliferation of private events taking over public spaces.

He mentioned in particular the “debacle” of the 2018/19 Christmas Market, which left Princes Street Gardens (East) as a massive mud bath. Pressure from the Cockburn Association, and other groups, had led to a rethink. His lesson from such controversies was that “if there is enough public pressure, change does happen”.

He also referred to the way that public space is used by private developers – for example George IV Bridge outside the former Missoni Hotel which has been used by the contractors for around five years, causing ongoing traffic congestion. Security and crowd control has led to the installation of unsightly barriers on our streets – and he said it was appropriate to mention these measures on the day that Martyn’s Law was given Royal Assent.



Prime Minister Keir Starmer meets Figen Murray, the mother of Martyn Hett who was killed in the Manchester Arena attacks terror attacks in 2017 following the announcement that Martyn's Law has been given Royal Assent. Picture by Lauren Hurley / No 10 Downing Street



February 2019 Princes Street Gardens after Edinburgh's Christmas

International comparisons

Fiona Rankin of Edinburgh World Heritage remarked on Edinburgh's "unique streetscape" with its 4,000 listed buildings. However, she felt that the lack of a "unified vision", as well as a general absence of high quality materials was diminishing this. She also felt that the city is in transition as transport is decarbonised, but urged the city to be bolder, pointing out that pedestrianisation would cut the costs of maintenance.

These themes were outlined in an excellent presentation by two Edinburgh University students, who have been conducting research on behalf of Edinburgh World Heritage and who have created a visual inventory. They argued that the state of Edinburgh's streetscape presented a "lost respect for heritage".

There was often a lack of consistency across the city, typified by very different styles of bike racks and street lighting found in different areas. There was nothing unified about these which contributed to a “lack of visual coherence”. Another example they focused on was the state of the water fountains in the city. While a good job had been done of restoring the fountain in West Bow, more modern fountains in the city were not in keeping with the streets they are on.



Photograph by Gareth Easton Photography for Scottish Water
The students made comparisons with similar size cities such as Copenhagen, where a more coherent, less cluttered streetscape was evident. Even the shop signs have been restricted to the old style and the city has its own recommended colour scheme. Their city planners had made more substantial efforts to pedestrianise significant segments of the city centre, which has not happened in Edinburgh, perhaps with the exception of Rose Street which itself is in a state of disrepair. They also argued that cities such as Prague and Bath offered good models for Edinburgh to follow, as both had more consistent and more

cohesive streetscapes. They had done a better job at demonstrating that efforts to make cities easier to travel around did not mean reducing their historic appearance. In Prague for example there was a competition and a jury to establish designs for street furniture.

In spite of its infrastructure

David Hunter of Living Streets Edinburgh quoted a city official who in 2016 had said to a public meeting that he had a vision to double the width of every pavement. That person is Paul Lawrence, who is now the Chief Executive of the council.

Mr Hunter argued that while Edinburgh is a very walkable city, this is largely “in spite of its infrastructure”. He said that the policy of prioritising pedestrians is not reflected in practice.

In many areas of the city, pavements were in a poor state and poorly laid out, making it difficult for anyone with disabilities or using a wheelchair (wheelchair users were often left out of the picture when projects to improve opportunities for “wheeling” around the city). The Cowgate was a particularly “dreadful” example of this. While the road was completely resurfaced, the pavement was “untouched”.

Given the vast numbers who use this during the Fringe, the need to make substantial improvements was an urgent one. In addition Leith Walk is, Hunter argued, an example of an expensive project which failed to produce a good streetscape. After the road, tramway and bike lanes were pushed into a space which a former Transport Convener admitted was too small, “pedestrians got what was left”.

He blamed utility companies who dig up the city streets with little or no responsibility for their restoration. And he said that tackling the legacy of “awful pavements” is difficult when the status of the Edinburgh Street Design Guidance and

its numerous factsheets is unclear.

He ended his part of the talk by looking at the “elephant in the room” – traffic. He noted that in contrast to other historic city centres in Europe, Edinburgh has comparatively few pedestrianised streets. He admits that it is not easy to reduce traffic, but said that “the jury is out” on whether the council has a plan to do that. It was, for example, “crazy” to have “unrestricted traffic on the Canongate”, given how many tourists visit that area. He concluded by suggesting that there was plenty of good policy out there but that implementation was often poor which led to “glacial change”.

An off-putting environment

Alex Robb of cycling organisation **Spokes**, began by looking at reasons why there was not more cycling in the city. It was not Edinburgh’s weather or the hills which are putting people off, but simply because it was not a particularly enjoyable experience. Many roads in the centre were particularly congested, with South Bridge the worst example. This put many off from cycling in Edinburgh. Alex said that though the numbers cycling in the city was steadily rising (as evidenced by [recent Cycling UK stats](#)), there were many others who would like to cycle but found the congested and cluttered streets unappealing.

Robb welcomed recent big projects such as The City Centre West to East Link (CCWEL), which had helped encourage those concerned about cycling in busy traffic. He felt that other such projects should be welcomed but were often vulnerable to lengthy planning delays. Often a mere “handful of objectors” could delay a project for years. For instance, he feared that the project to radically alter George Street had been delayed so long that it might never happen, especially with so many budgets which have been cut. He felt this would be a pity as such projects had generally had a demonstrably positive impact

on life in the city. ([Local stores in New York sited next to a protected bike lane enjoyed a 49% increase in sales, compared to an average of 3% for Manhattan reported Fast Company.](#))



CCWEL

Where's the money coming from?

In the Q&A session, the question of funding was highlighted, given the billions of pounds “verbally spent” by the panellists. One source mentioned was the Tourist Tax – Cllr Joanna Mowat said that some of these will be used for maintaining and improving the streetscape. Others, such as David Hunter, felt that most of the more urgent issues were of the “bread and butter” variety and would not be particularly expensive. For example, well known issues in specific “microspaces” did not require major projects to address them. The litter strewn and foul-smelling state of Fleshmarket

Close, a prime route for tourists leaving Waverley, was an example of this highlighted by one member of the audience. Nobody mentioned the [2015 Twelve Closes project](#) backed by Edinburgh World Heritage which in any case seems to have foundered.

Other examples included reducing the amount of graffiti in the city which some felt was 'everywhere' (though in truth, far less than most cities). The consensus was that dealing with graffiti quickly was key. One audience member (involved with the Royal Academy) suggested the use of lime wash to quickly cover graffiti while preserving a traditional appearance. There is a [place on the council's website](#) to report graffiti and a team to remove it – but it is questionable how effective that is.

The quality of maintenance and repair work was raised by a number of those in the room. What guarantees were there that work was being properly supervised and problems quickly addressed. For instance, while the newly laid setts on the Lawnmarket were likely to "look beautiful", how would they look in five years' time one person asked. Were the right techniques being used and should we have a team dedicated to repairing smaller areas of the setts in an effort to avoid the expense of huge projects with ongoing maintenance.

In his closing remarks, Terry Levinthal reiterated the theme that "the micro stuff" and maintenance was just as important as the larger scale streetscape projects. He set out that the Cockburn Association would be holding four further public events to examine the issues raised with more focus. They hope that such events will help close the gap between good proposals and their implementation.

Editor's Comment

I think it was a good positive thing that City Centre councillor, Jo Mowat, spoke at the Cockburn meeting during the

Q&A pointing out that the council is recruiting for a new City Centre manager. She said a lack of integrated management is a main problem.

I think that the still new Transport Convener, Cllr Stephen Jenkinson, missed a great opportunity to put forward his own informed point of view – even just to say that he was listening to the audience, or to confirm where the funding comes from. In common with other events like this there is a deal of misinformation peddled, simply because people think they are correct – or they don't have the information in the first place.

As Alex Robb of Spokes said the consultation process is flawed and the Traffic Regulation Order process is broken and slow. Government funding is not matching demand, and in the case of the big wins for active travel in recent years, these all took around a decade to progress from thinking to completion. It all needs to happen much more quickly.

The CCWEL is a case in point. It was derailed for years by shops and businesses in Roseburn, many of whom are still in business despite their dire warnings. Melville Street and Crescent – one member of the audience said he had never seen a bike on the cycle lane which is simply untrue. He also said that the rearrangement to the crescent with its many benches, planters and shorter distances for pedestrians to cross is not a success. This was first mooted in 2017 [with a public consultation](#), so now is really not the time to complain.

Another member of the audience said that Sustrans is an unaccountable quango and we should “Beware Greeks bearing gifts.”

A further comment about the amount of yellow paint used in the city is well made – I have read suggestions before about removing all the paint, getting a legislative change from the government to allow a presumption against parking – so drivers

would only be able to park where there was a painted line. It is certainly food for thought

As is always the case concerned citizens are many in Edinburgh and this was a very well attended event with a range of views.

I look forward to future Cockburn meetings.

