

SHARING OUR SPACE

Words by Sue Mitchell and Ben Hamilton-Baillie

Sharing our space with strangers is an uncomfortable concept for most of us. Several decades of road safety campaigns have deeply ingrained the message that motor traffic is dominant over, and dangerous to, pedestrians. So, pedestrians sharing their space with vehicles has become so alien to our thinking that we might liken it to seeing polar bears sitting under palm trees eating ice cream. Yet Hans Monderman, a Dutch road safety engineer, removed signs and lines and any form of segregation between traffic and pedestrians in towns and villages across Holland in the 1980's with remarkable success in terms of safety and free flowing traffic. He said "when faced with a safety problem, most engineers tend to install something additional. My instinct is always to take something away." His designs emphasised context and deliberately integrated drivers into the social and cultural world of the settlement, resulting in radically reduced speeds, improved safety and transformation of the quality of the built environment without limiting or restricting traffic flow. His road schemes had no need of road signs, intrusive coloured road markings, concrete kerbs, build-outs or any of the other traditional responses in the highway engineers design guides. So can we achieve this in Dorset?

Dorset's Rural Roads Protocol (DRRP), Dorset County Council's new approach to the design and maintenance of their rural roads, is based upon Monderman's principles of reducing clutter and using local context and character to influence driver behaviour. Dorset's new way of working was triggered by the publication "Reclaiming Our Rural Highways" – a scoping report on issues affecting the character of rural roads commissioned by the Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Partnership. The AONB are continuing to work with Dorset County Council to develop their new approach which reduces the detrimental engineered impact of highway management on our countryside and villages.

As part of this work, the Dorset AONB organised a series of events to demonstrate to communities how their traffic issues could be addressed using the techniques which Monderman employed rather than requesting more signs, lines or other urbanising features. Residents of Maiden Newton and South Perrott have been given the opportunity to work with Ben Hamilton-Baillie (hamilton-baillie associates), Dorset AONB and Dorset County Council to explore and develop a range of solutions for communities like themselves, located on busy A and B roads. The residents identified their concerns about traffic, most being associated with vehicles e.g. speed, safety and the comfort of pedestrians. Other issues raised were about the barriers caused by busy roads, difficulties for cyclists and damage to buildings and structures. Noise and vibrations also cause problems, as well as the deterioration in the coherence, character and quality of the rural built environment. It is likely that similar issues affect every settlement situated on a busy road in the UK.

Maiden Newton and South Perrott are pretty villages set comfortably within the surrounding landscape, developed using local materials and styles. However their local character rarely comes through because the foreground is so dominated by road markings and other highway impedimenta. When driving through these villages, the pretty River Parrett adjacent to the road or the beautiful mill and millstream set back from the road goes unnoticed. We are too busy trying to get through quickly, avoiding on-coming traffic and eye contact with anyone in case they are trying to cross the road or emerge from a junction. Cocooned in our cars, we lose any sense that we are passing through anywhere different - and therefore our driving should change - because the road environment is the same as in the stretches between villages. There are few clues for us at the start of the village, beyond the ubiquitous nameplate, and even fewer as we leave it.

By the simple action of removing "highway clutter" and giving drivers strong clues that this a place where people live and go about their business, driver behaviour will be transformed as surely as it was for Monderman. Highway signs and lines appear to act as a barrier to reading contextual clues. Without the signs and lines, drivers have to rely on normal cognitive skills to "read" their surroundings and the resulting lower speeds appear to reduce congestion by allowing road junctions to work more efficiently. In addition, slower speeds allow eye contact with others and in general, encourage a more considerate attitude to other road users – whether vehicular, pedestrian or cyclist – as we are all sharing the same village space.

Ben Hamilton-Baillie showed Maiden Newton and South Perrott residents how to look at their villages in a new way. Together they identified important locations where their village character and local distinctiveness had been eroded by traditional highway engineering and ways in which it might be restored. These can be as simple as removing road markings in particular locations to erase the urbanising and dominating effect of the road and help to create a slower speed environment for the whole village. Creating clearer entry points to the village and a series of “spaces” within it is key to alerting drivers to the different environment, and can be achieved by the use of different surface materials or appropriate surface colours and “furniture” like benches and noticeboards, within these “spaces”. Many villages have narrow “pinch points” where traffic regularly causes damage to adjoining property. Removal of centre-line markings and reducing the apparent width of the road through the introduction of a contrasting edge treatment to the carriageway will reduce speed, engender careful driving and communication with other road users.

Exploiting and enhancing a sense of place lies at the heart of Ben’s work with these two villages and underpins solutions for any location. A sense of place and retaining local distinctiveness is also central to the Dorset AONB’s aims and objectives and to what makes Dorset such a special place. The principle of place-making is fundamental also to the Dorset Rural Roads Protocol. It draws on the findings from “shared space” projects throughout Europe which began with Hans Monderman’s work in Holland. Monderman’s innovative thinking has taken a bit longer to cross the Channel to us but it has certainly reached Dorset now and been welcomed with great enthusiasm.

We shall just have to get used to sharing space - in our villages at least!

The full report can be found on the Dorset AONB website www.dorsetaonb.org.uk
Following on from this initial work will be a “toolkit” to help other communities follow the process for themselves.

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