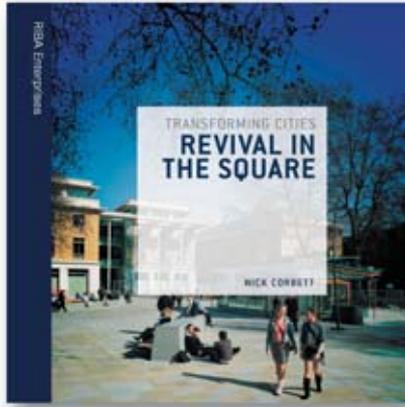


## Book review

**TRANSFORMING CITIES: REVIVAL IN THE SQUARE**

Nick Corbett, RIBA Enterprises, 2004, p/b, £19.95, ISBN: 1 85946 160 3

Images from Nick Corbett's *Revival in the square*:

Below left: The Grand Canal in Venice acts as a processional route to the Piazza San Marco

Right: A lamp column on the revamped Kensington High Street, London, accommodates traffic signals and other street furniture

Below right: Bridley Place in Birmingham shows how people like to place themselves near something, such as a sculpture or pillar

If you are looking for a style magazine-type book to flick through for design ideas, then don't look here. But, if you want a well-researched book on public spaces that tackles both theory and practice in a logical way, read on.

One question that has always intrigued me is – how does the average person perceive public spaces compared to how a design professional experiences them? I am not sure that Nick Corbett fully answers this, but he certainly begins to unravel the answer.

Unusually, Corbett is very strong on community and explains a process that begins with participation, where clear urban design aims and objectives are agreed, and moves through consultation, when sketch designs are discussed with the community. He is also good on the mechanisms to take a vision through to implementation.

Starting from developing an urban design vision strategy, Corbett goes into

the nitty gritty mechanics of creating partnerships and managing the vision, as well as various funding arrangements. Such issues are all essential when you consider how many strategies are still sitting on shelves.

There is useful discussion on the proportions of a square through historical examples, with a lot of lessons, not surprisingly, from Renaissance Italy. Corbett infers that they are best rectangular, with a building height-to-space ratio of between 1:2 and 1:4. Overall size is difficult and the book discusses whether they should be big enough to accommodate large-scale, but infrequent events or the right size for everyday use. In any case, it is essential that they are small enough that people will animate, and to achieve this might need sub-divisions.

Vitality is needed and the type of building fronting a square can make all the difference – public buildings such as town halls, cathedrals and libraries draw people to them, especially now that the latter are much more than book lenders. As Corbett says, it may be necessary to restrict certain uses for buildings to avoid ones that don't generate community activity. Squares also need to be located on busy pedestrian flows and often benefit from street vendors to attract people.

The case studies offered are varied – some historical, like the Plaça Reial in Barcelona and Trafalgar Square (with the recent interventions), while the main contemporary study is of Birmingham. Each is researched in depth looking at process and mechanisms as well as product.

There are some useful checklists at the end of the chapters, called 'performance checks', which sum up sometimes disparate items that you have read in the chapter, and perhaps not fully remembered. *Revival in the square* is deceptive in the amount of information it contains in relation to its size. It has numerous references – enough to keep you busy for years if you read them all – and useful statistics (from Holland, Denmark and Sweden) and quotes that could support arguments in a live scheme. By way of criticism, the first part of the book lacks illustrations – there are more later, but many are too small to really tell the story.

But, let's be constructive. The book is about important issues: it is through spaces between buildings, not the buildings themselves, that inhabitants come to know and relate to their area – and that is crucial to their well-being. **Philip Cave, principal, Philip Cave Associates – landscape architects and urban designers**



Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea/Project Centre/Woodhouse



Left and far left: Nick Corbett