

A word...

Paving

BY TIM WATERMAN HONORARY EDITOR

Often, as quickly as a new urban scheme is completed, a ubiquitous and pernicious problem will inevitably appear, even in the most high-value and high-profile locations. Paving stones are removed to effect repairs on some subterranean service and are not replaced but discarded, and the void is filled with sticky, black, bitumenous asphalt. This isn't a design flaw, but rather a symptom of a systemic problem with our approach to paving materials in the public realm.

In the mid-20th century, Steen Eiler Rasmussen wrote about the great beauty of London's streets and the simplicity and elegance of the pairing of Portland stone and granite to create a magnificent and unified street scene. His *Experiencing Architecture* of 1959 includes a black-and-white photo of a rain-wet street, curb and footpath that is a timeless image of London, as surprisingly recognisable as any of London's skyline landmarks, and as truly British in its restraint as a stiff upper lip. These streets are as much a part of the idiom of the place as Calçada Portuguesa – Portuguese pavement – is of Lisbon's.

Rasmussen may well have been trying to hold on to something that was already disappearing, as designers embraced choice and variety, covering Blighty's public floors with a vomitous pub carpet of clashing blocks, slabs and pours. Traffic planners and parking specialists merrily

painted all of this with lines and stripes in a sort of urban camouflage, and then years later all of this would be compounded further with the expensive and mostly useless excrescence that is tactile paving.

In the future, our cities will have to radically rethink approaches to paving surfaces. A limited variety of materials and methods would mean that workers of all sorts could be taught to understand conventional paving methods to avoid the inevitable tarpits and 'snail trails' that deface our streets. Further, a commitment to a better-paid and more highly skilled pool of manual workers is a more socially sustainable stance.

In the future, we should strive for the designer's voice not to trump local distinctiveness. A limitation of the materials we use does not represent a limitation of our creativity, it is just a clear definition of parameters – the rules of the game. We also have an exciting challenge ahead as we begin the work of adapting our streets for better storm water management, shared space, or different modes of transportation. We may, for example, need 'louder' street surfaces in the future to cope with the silent approaches of electric cars and bicycles.

Green cities aren't just about ecology; they're about resilience, culture, skills and beauty, and we have much interesting work ahead. We must think deeply about the contemporary and sustainable materials, methods and technologies that will express our cities in the future. ●



PHOTOGRAPH: JOHANNA WARD