

Why is there such an abundance of guard rails in Britain? This month, we look at how good crossing design can replace the need to fence pedestrians in.

Design notes

The British seem to have a passion for guard rails. Travel to any other country and they seem not to grow in such abundance, a point noticed in 2001 by the House of Commons Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs. It commented in its 11th report: 'It is remarkable that they should be considered essential here when, on our visit to Barcelona, Milan, Ferrara and Munich, we scarcely saw a single piece of guard railing, or a staggered, cattle-pen crossing.'

It went further and declared them ugly and a nuisance. 'These grotesque items both inconvenience pedestrians and disfigure our cities. Our own experience of the staggered pelican crossings outside the Palace of Westminster suggests they are ignored by many pedestrians, who are unwilling to accept the delay they cause.'

In fact, over the years, there have been some pioneering projects whereby councils have carried out economic regeneration schemes, renewed their public realm and, at the same time, removed long stretches of guard rails.

The Strand, in Westminster is a good example of this from the 1990s. The pedestrian crossings were moved to where they are actually needed - on the pedestrian's direct and natural line of travel. The crossing mid-way along the Strand was repositioned so it follows directly the pedestrian route from Embankment to Covent Garden. The crossing was also widened.

The much-awarded High Street scheme in Kensington shows how guard rails can be removed at a complex intersection to reduce the frustration of pedestrians. The original layout required pedestrians to cross the road in three stages, each with its own press button and wait.

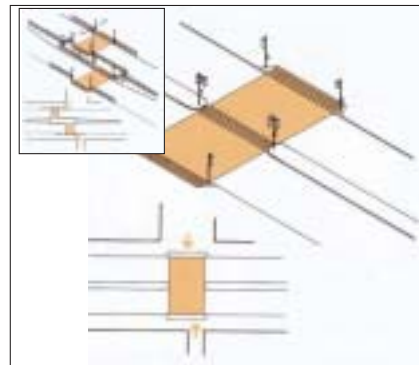
Instead of going through the conventional safety audit process, the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea decided to remove all but a small section of guard rail. The one place where the guard rails remain, although in a more elegant style, is at a place where anyone trying to cross the road would be faced with four separate flows of traffic and where even an able-bodied pedestrian would be putting themselves in danger.

But the relatively-short length of guard rail is only on one side of the road. Someone about to cross from the other side would see it and be deterred. In stainless steel, it matches most of the other street furniture in the street, so a complete design strategy is followed in every detail.

As Craig Wilson, the council's director of transportation and highways said: 'Our desire for simplicity, quality and elegance justified our guidelines for the design.' The council recognised that people expected safety, but not at the expense of visual quality and amenity.

Studies to establish the real value of guard rails in safety terms have been inconclusive. The London Road Safety Unit's research summary No 3* concludes there are no compelling safety reasons for guard rails, except near schools. However, safety cannot be ignored, and should be addressed sensibly. 'To ensure that, in departing from safety design norms, we were not actually compromising safety. We have adopted an "evidence-based" approach,' Wilson said, when he explained Kensington & Chelsea's policy in 2002. 'Our approach was to go ahead as we thought right, monitor carefully, and be prepared to add further features later, if necessary.' Now, three years later, the council has not had to make any adjustments.

Yet while these projects, which thoughtfully combine urban design with traffic engineering, are being carried out, in most of our towns and cities across the country, the march of these 'grotesque items' continues - with little evidence that the majority have any practical purpose.



On your guard: (top): Kensington & Chelsea after; (above): Diagrams of the Strand, before; and diagrams of Kensington, before and after