

This month, **Colin Davis** reports on the issues surrounding putting street lamps on buildings.

Design notes

Walk through a historic town on a sunny afternoon and you will stumble across little groups of tourists standing, gaping at what the UK has to offer. Many from the New World come to tread the same streets as their forebears, to look for real evidence of the past and not Disneyworld make believe.

These visitors are part of the constantly-expanding economy of international tourism, a significant earner. We offer them restored historic buildings – often still being used for their original purpose – and, increasingly, completely-restored public spaces.

The techniques for whole public space or street restoration should mean damaged or decayed parts are skilfully replaced in order that the whole appears as near the original as possible. So, with historic towns, all the charm of a Dickensian Christmas card should be there without the anguish and danger of that period. Indeed, we demand modern transport systems, safety, and lighting standards to be incorporated everywhere.

Public lighting, whether for streetlighting or floodlighting, needs careful design.

The example in the pictures is a historic marketplace in a small Wiltshire town. The buildings are mostly distinguished Georgian or early Victorian structures, which follow an earlier medieval town plan. At its centre, there is a historic tower commemorating a citizen of the town. It is illuminated at night with four floodlights, each neatly incorporated into a replica lamppost, contemporary with those of William Henry Fox Talbot.

Although the space was traditionally a cattle and farm equipment market, it is now used mostly as a municipal car park. Rather than looking lost among a sea of cars, the important views of the tower have been safeguarded. In fact, the car park seems agreeable enough for two people to sit there at the base of the tower and chat.

The process of restoration took seven years and involved three councils. The tower is owned and managed by the town council. It is surrounded by a car park that is owned and managed by the district council, which, in turn, is surrounded by county council highways.

Streetlighting, a county responsibility, was fixed neatly and unobtrusively to buildings. The colour of the lanterns in each case blended exactly with the colour of the wall to which it was fixed. The district council negotiated way-leaves for the lights, cables and control equipment.

All the footway paving was also restored and street furniture clutter removed. Removing the modern streetlighting columns was essential, but part of a bigger endeavour. The budgets of all three councils needed to be co-ordinated, which is what took the time.

The principle of fixing streetlighting to buildings has been developed most successfully in the City of London. It has a local byelaw which allows the corporation to insist that lights and their equipment are fixed to buildings, which has led to two important trends.

First, a practice has developed whereby light fittings and cables are sensitively positioned in relation to the architectural characteristics of historic buildings. The lights are positioned with the same care that would have been given to windows or decorative art. Cables are hidden under cornices at the side of columns or under ledges.

Second, it has an effect on the design of modern buildings in the City.



Seeing the light: Small market town (*top and right*) in Wiltshire and (*left*) Bank station in the City of London

Because the principle has the force of law, architects and owners are naturally concerned that retrofitted lights might mar the original design concepts of their prestigious buildings. Lighting positions are therefore agreed at planning application stage.

Lights can be fixed to new buildings and located exactly to contribute to the architectural style of the building. Architect James Stirling's idiosyncratic postmodern-style building at Bank station is a good example. Cable ducts are internal. Control equipment boxes are discreetly set into external walls, although accessible for maintenance at all times.

In both examples, streetlighting standards have not been eroded, but simply made less obvious during the daytime. Back in Wiltshire, those tourists can admire a well-presented historic monument, read its inscription and ponder their genealogy.