

This month's practical street design notes look at the layout of pedestrian crossings, and zebra crossings in particular, as an important element in the design of public places.

# Design notes

More of us are now taking advantage of the ridiculously low airfares to take short breaks in European cities. But while the brochures show enticing vistas of newly-designed or refurbished plazas and piazzas, the reality can be even more remarkable.

In the cold of a Scandinavian winter, people are so keen to take advantage of their civilised public spaces that they sit out in the freezing air under blankets. They are also seen strolling about on expansive pedestrian crossings, each seemingly placed in the very position that anyone would wish to cross.

Coming back to reality, we shake our heads in sorrow at the restrictive nature of our own national traffic-management regulations. Here, pedestrians are expected to make inconvenient detours, and are herded into tight sheep pens in the middle of the road while, urged to cross quickly by a shrill bell, they wave sincere gratitude or preferably make a tug of the forelock.

But are our regulations really so restrictive?

The geometry of a pedestrian crossing is set out clearly in the relevant regulations\*. A cursory glance at the accompanying diagrams appears to confirm the sad truth that we are stuck with a standard 2.4m-wide crossing and an attendant stream of zigzags lines. But there is hope.

Although the diagram illustrates, clearly, the minimum requirement, the notes and captions to the diagram do add that there is a wide range of alternatives which can be assembled within the strictures of the regulations. We tend to mislead ourselves by simply looking at the pictures, rather than reading the words.

The width, for instance, can, without further referral, be some 10m wide and the zig zags may – if the conditions are deemed by the local highway authority to be correct – be reduced to two from eight.

The result can be seen in our own diagram of one of the alternatives – a wide, spacious crossing that gives pedestrians a greater feeling of security and comfort. There may be some inconvenience to drivers, but that has to be offset against the advantages to pedestrians. The problem is, there are no recognised methods to measure a pedestrian's sense of security and comfort, or against a driver's inconvenience.

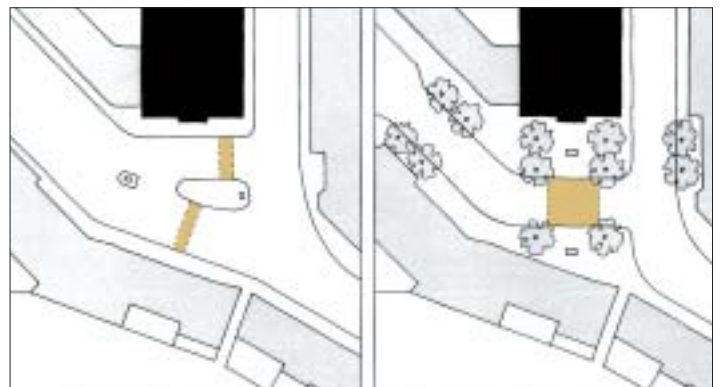
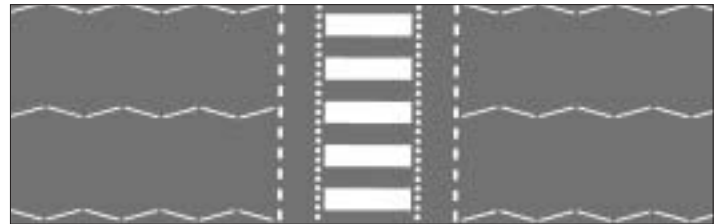
From an urban design perspective, the opportunities offered by the permitted variations become clearer when they are applied to the design at a particular location.

In the two sketch plans, the black shape represents an important local civic building, perhaps a town hall. In the left-hand sketch, a normal arrangement of a two-stage conventional crossing has been located, with little or no regard to the adjacent buildings. In the right hand sketch, the area in front of the town hall has been reorganised into a recognisable place.

Trees have been planted at the front to emphasise the symmetry of the entrance to the building and help create a recognisable, useable square, or place of the kind that local people would value and visitors remember.

To add further value, the arrangement of the crossing extends the new square logically across the zebra crossing to the footway on the other side of the road. It extends the sense of importance of the building well beyond its immediate boundary.

The traffic arrangement, instead of completely ignoring the layout



Are our regulations on zebras restrictive (top)?  
The words suggest possibilities for wider lines and less zig-zags (middle)  
offering room to manoeuvre better-quality streetscapes (bottom)

of the adjoining buildings that determine the character of the area, has been integrated with it. The total scene has been treated as people see it – as a whole.

With these lawful alternatives in mind, a skilful design team can begin to help form memorable places. Places where people would be proud to live and which might even be on the itinerary of someone's city break. Perhaps, more often, we need people with the skills of different disciplines to work together, preferably led by someone who is fortunate to personally possess those interdisciplinary skills.

\*Zebra, pelican and puffin pedestrian crossings regulations and general directions 1997. Regulations 5 (1), and 6(1), which includes a reference to Schedule 1. Schedule 1, Part II paragraph 6 and diagram.

The regulations and particularly the diagram are available online: [www.legislation.hmso.gov.uk/si/si1997/9724001.pdf](http://www.legislation.hmso.gov.uk/si/si1997/9724001.pdf)

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