



DOM HENRY

Above: The informal layout of the Old Market Square in Nottingham juxtaposed with the classic form of TC Howitt's Council House

Right: An image showing the traditional Goose Fair taking place in the square, with the Council House under construction in the background



When Nottingham's Old Market Square – one of the oldest in the UK – was in need of a revamp, design practice Gustafson Porter was called in to transform the area from an austere site into a modern space. **Gian Luca Amadei** takes a look at the outcome





With its 800-year history as a marketplace, the Old Market Square in Nottingham is one of the oldest public squares in the UK. Second in size only to London's Trafalgar Square, it covers a total surface of about 22,000 sq m. Half of this area has now been redesigned by Gustafson Porter. Sober and understated in its design, yet ingenious in its technological solution, the new scheme maintained the deeply rooted historical references of its site.

One of the aims of the brief to designers was to encourage wider

usage of the square by a large number of users. The circulation surveys carried out in 2004 showed that 78 per cent of the public navigated just the perimeter of the square, avoiding its core. The area was particularly underused during the evening.

The square is located outside the classical – and formal – Council House building, which was completed in 1929 and designed by Nottingham-born architect TC Howitt. Before Gustafson Porter's intervention, the square reflected this austere style. 'The previous layout was rigid and formal to such

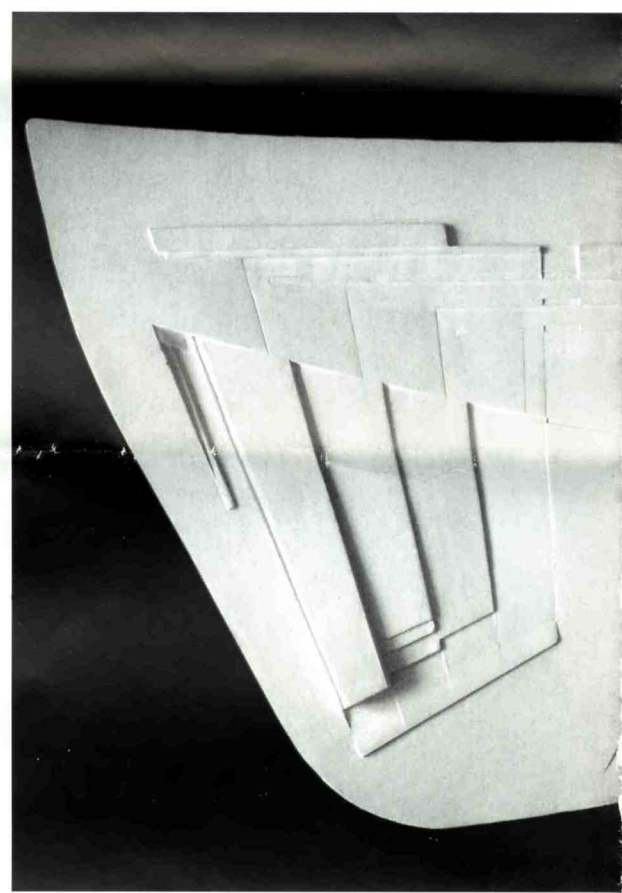
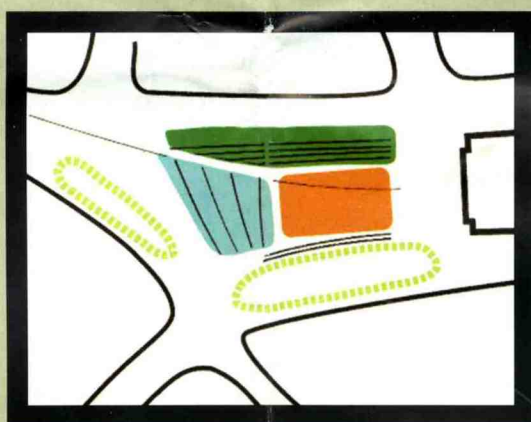
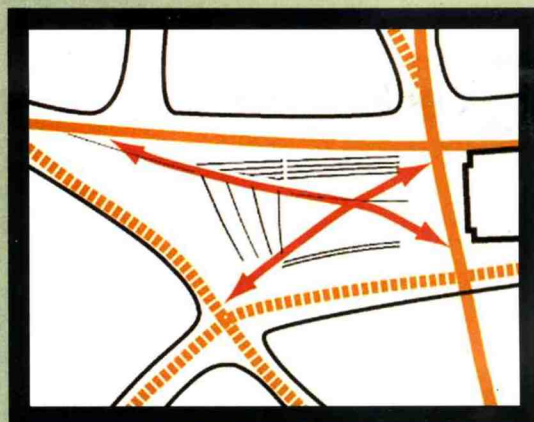
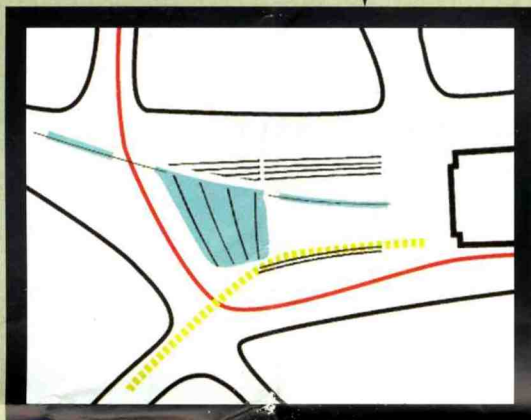
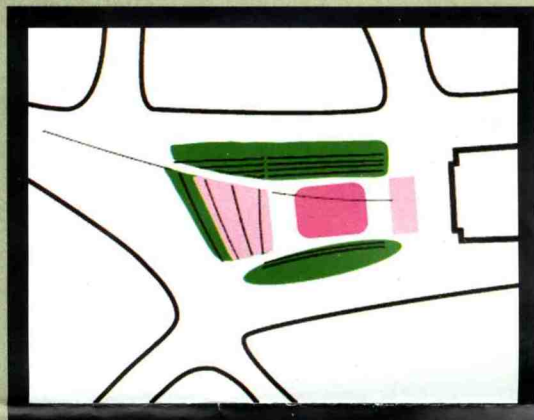
an extent that it removed the possibility of hosting events in the square,' says Nilesch Patel, associate architect at Gustafson Porter.

'Immediately after the opening last March, the square held an event for 10,000 people.'

When the architects started working on the scheme they wanted to reconnect the square to its history as a medieval market. 'We felt that the market or, if not the market, events should be coming back into the square,' says Neil Porter, one of the principals at Gustafson Porter. 'We were interested in its very

accidental organic form and decided to draw inspiration from it instead of retaining the formal layout, which felt awkward within this particular space.'

Gustafson Porter blended the classic elements of a square – such as green spaces, street furniture and water features – to create an area that would draw people in. 'Our design solution is actually a very simple layout,' says Porter. 'It is the result of the observation of what people do when in a public space, coupled with some common sense.'

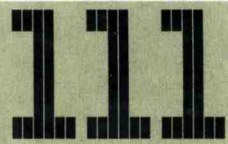


Top left: A map of the square drawn in 1610. The curved wall running the length of the square used to divide the Saxon and Norman boroughs

Left: Study diagrams of the layout analysing green areas and circulation. A footprint of the dividing wall has been retained as part of the scheme

Above: 'A scale model is partially informative when a design scheme includes water features because water behaves differently in relation to scale,' says Neil Porter

Right: Competition plan drawing of the Gustafson Porter scheme. The asymmetric water feature on the left-hand site counterbalances the Council House building opposite



The new central market square is composed of a light-coloured surface of slip-resistant Portuguese granite that complements the Portland stone of the Council House, which is Nottingham's premier civic building.

The square has vehicle access when events are being staged or market stalls being set up, and also creates a flexible environment for a variety of performances. The new terraces (formed of grey, black, white and beige granite blocks) provide seating areas. Their colours reflect the range of stone used in the surrounding building facades and

also delineate level changes. Their tapering forms create rows of benches, while others provide spaces for planting. Unlike many UK public squares, which are dominated by traffic, signage and street furniture, the Old Market Square is a clutter-free public space that allows a visual link across the site.

'We wanted to eliminate as much as possible of that clutter and create something more clean,' says Patel. 'We carried out a survey of the street furniture. A lot of work went into the seating and the modelling of the terraces so as to integrate

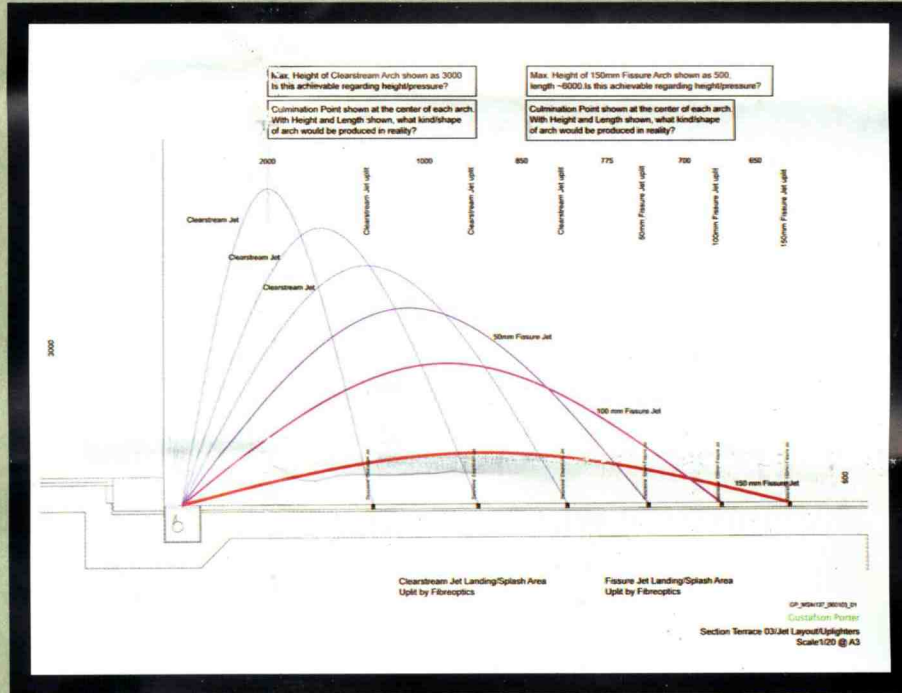
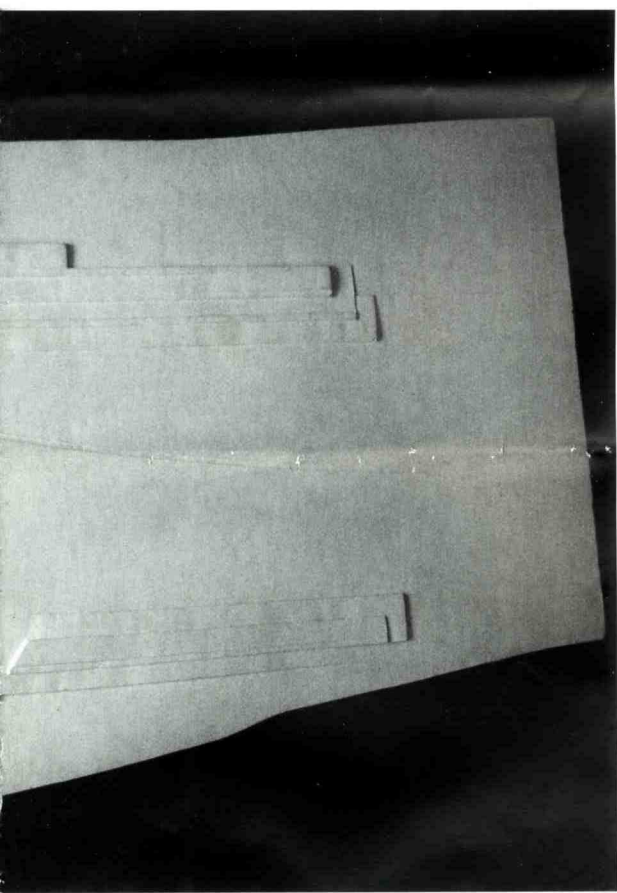
them and the steps into the square itself.'

Different types of granite were tested before work started on-site to check how dirty they would get, especially with chewing-gum. In the end, a stone grain that would disguise such dirt was chosen. The water features, meanwhile, were designed to be varied: 'We tried to create an effect through simplicity by using gravity to create water movements that are not meant to be forceful but natural,' says Patel.

The site is right in the heart of the city, with a tramline running

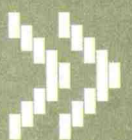
through it, so the construction was challenging. The practice put together almost 250 drawings just for the layout of the Portuguese granite blocks. A sewage main also runs 12 m below the square, so part of the water feature is on pylons bridging the sewer. To allow for events to take place, a new electrical grid was put in place so that the square can be used for concerts or other events. Street lamps were designed to support sound-system attachments.

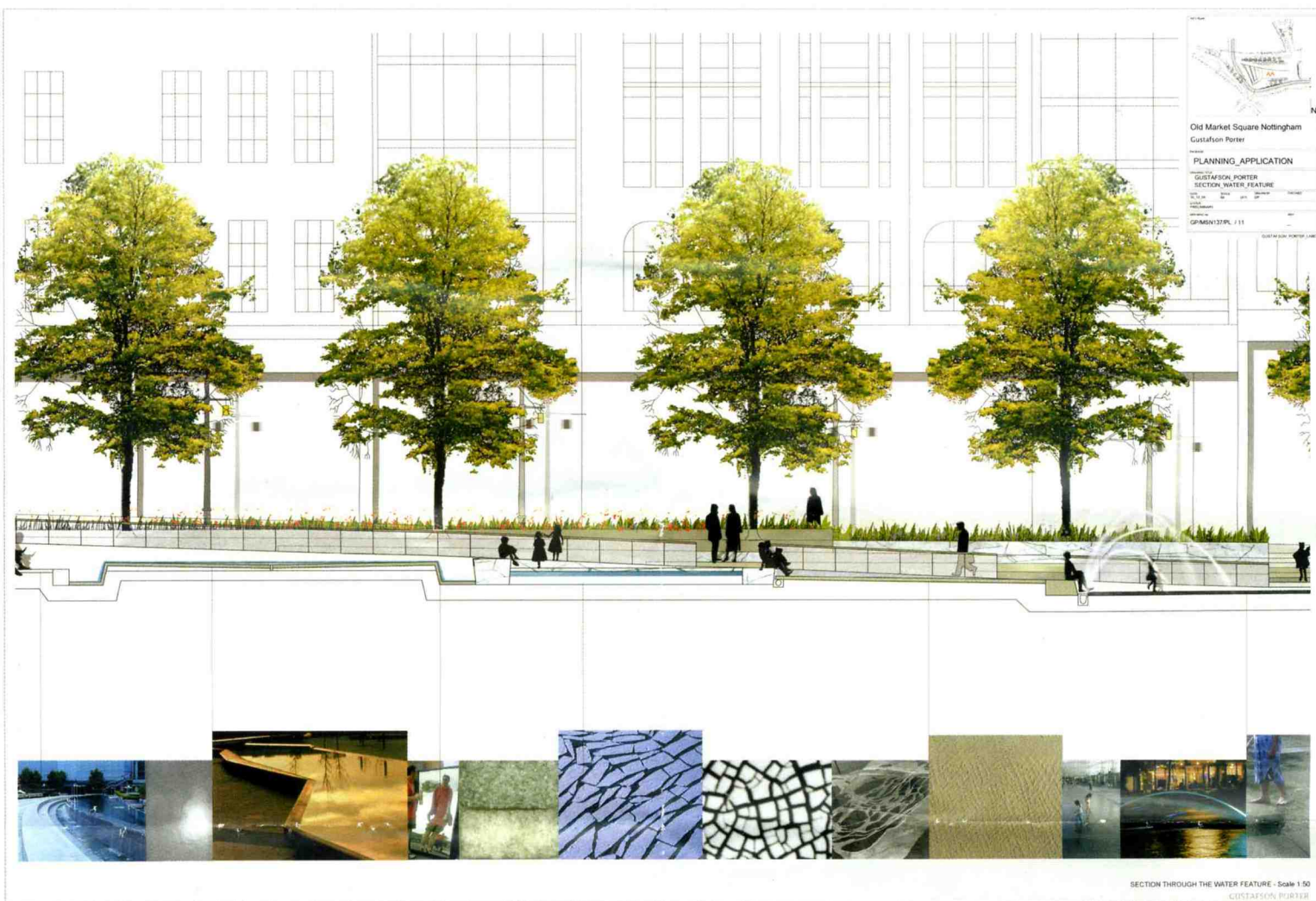
'We have created an array of different characters to the space, different ambiances, as well as



Left: Study diagram used to assess the throwing distances of water jets and their fall to aid layout of LED lighting in the pavement where the jets land

Below: Daytime shot of the installed water jets. The height and throw of the arches is regulated by an anemometer, a device measuring the velocity of wind





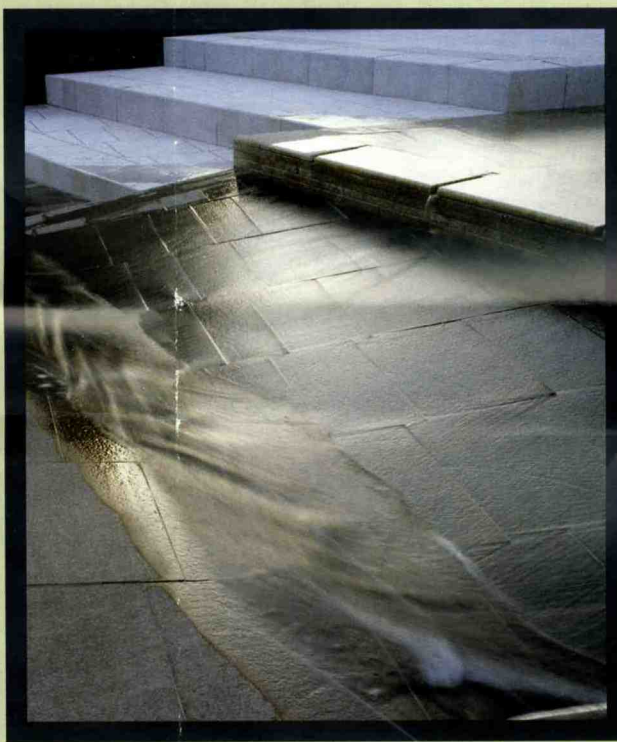
Above: Competition board showing the subtle level changes in the square, as well as the materials and finishes adopted

Below: Close-up of the finish used for the pool. The area can also be used as a pedestrian space and to stage events.

Right: Gravity is the element that brings to life the water feature when in use, keeping its flow organic and natural



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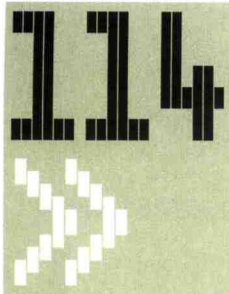
possibilities for incidental meetings when moving diagonally through the square, says Porter. 'In a city the size of Nottingham, it's likely you'll meet someone you know in the square.' Just by modifying the height of a balustrade, for example, the practice obtained a possible meeting point: 'You might sit or lean there to stop and have a chat,' adds Porter.

In the proliferating landscape of overly designed regeneration schemes that attempt to reconfigure as well as reintegrate neglected spaces with the surrounding urban fabric, the Old Market Square is an elegant gesture.

It provides a deep assimilation of the pre-existing site and its immediate urban context.

'The general feel and character of the space is actually what we wanted to achieve,' says Porter. 'I'm hoping the city has found that the square it has is exactly what it wanted.' ■





Right: The small waterfalls along the pool's wall are obtained by simply offsetting the individual blocks of black granite from the main wall

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Above: The Council House building reflected in the pool. The balustrade is an extension of the footprint tracing the original existing dividing wall

Right: Night shot showing the subtle and elegant lighting methods adopted to underline the changes of level in the square



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