

# THE THREAT OF MATERIAL MONOTONY

## MARKET SQUARE GUSTAFSON PORTER *NOTTINGHAM 2007*

Nottingham is a jumble of a mediaeval street plan, Victorian grandeur in the Lace Market and post-war commercial developments squeezed in for good measure. As a result the urban fabric is incoherent and mixed.

Located at the commercial and civic heart of the city, its 800-year-old Market Square was, in the early part of this decade, looking its age. A circulation survey carried out in 2004 discovered that 78 per cent of the public navigated the perimeter of the square rather than pass across its core. What had once been a working market had become a bleak landscape of wonky concrete slabs and dirty fountains. So in 2007, the UK's second largest square (after Trafalgar) was given a revamp by landscape architects Gustafson Porter.

The practice combined boldness and subtlety in knitting together the space. The design fixes attention on the edges, clearing the centre of the square for activity. The mat of Portuguese granite blocks that paves the area mirrors the Portland stone of the grand council building. The threat of material monotony

is avoided by tiered terraces, which reflect the material presence of the buildings around it. The terraces provide planters, seating and act to control the existing landscape of the square – allowing vehicle and disabled access to the centre. The water feature at the western edge is large, but does not compete with the ornate, complex detail of the Council House façade it faces. Instead, it acts as an austere counterbalance, part of the careful orchestration of a picturesque space.

Market Square is a story of an organised client with a clear brief and an architect astute enough to understand it. The process involved consulting all users of the space, from teenage school children and Nottingham civic society to the police. 'I spoke to the person who coordinates the public programme for the square recently,' says Neil Porter of Gustafson Porter. 'They said that there is only one day each month that the square is not scheduled for use.'

The provision of services including power outlets, public address systems and concealed drainage provide a space that is adaptable enough to hold events ranging from a temporary ice rink to a pop concert.

Using public space has always been problematic in the UK. Central Europe



enjoys a climate that has supported a rich tradition of plazas and piazzas – Britain has since the Victorian era, struggled to create public spaces that combine a sense of identity with practicality. Currently, public space suffers its own identity crisis as in many cases what is perceived as being public is privately owned. This is illustrated in the space at More London on the capital's South Bank. There, sculpted out of the grey stone paving sits an amphitheatre. The monotony of the dark paving and unwieldy staircases give the space a monolithic, imposing and deeply unfriendly presence. The ambiguity of ownership and resultant paranoia about the right to be in such places is the blight of many public spaces.

The quiet strength of the Nottingham Market Square is the rationalisation of the space to simple elements and textures underpinned by the thoughtful availability of supporting services. The planning of the space responds to careful analysis of the way people use it. It may seem bizarre to praise a public space for encouraging people to use it, but this is why Nottingham Market Square stands out. It is a modern space, used by the city to bring together its citizens – the simple appearance hides its complex functions.

**TOP FIVE**  
**ADAM CARUSO ARCHITECT**

**RAVEN ROW 6A ARCHITECTS**

A remarkable contemporary art gallery in a set of restored/remade rooms that resonate with the ethic of the institution. It's a building that encourages the visitor to spend time with the work.

**CHRIST CHURCH SPITALFIELDS RED MASON/PURCELL MILLER TRITTON**

Walking into the restored Christ Church Spitalfields is like discovering a new Hawksmoor interior, slightly surreal but a great pleasure.

**TATE MODERN HERZOG DE MEURON**

The choice of the building, and the way it has been programmed over the last ten years, has changed the role of contemporary art in the UK.

**THE RED HOUSE TONY FRETTON**

A significant private house that revives the public role that such buildings have traditionally played in the European city. It's a building that is the equal of great city houses of London's past.

**SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT EMBT/RMJM**

A rare example of a building that is intended to embody the difficult values of a new parliament. The building's beautiful and purposeful construction makes it feel like something that will last for a long time.

