

Oxford Circus

For millennia, the maximisation of land use and spatial connectivity have influenced large-scale town planning efforts in cities. Planners across history have recognised the role of spatial optimisation and connectivity in establishing city hubs that dynamically stimulate socio-economic growth.

The Indus Valley Civilisation (modern-day Northwestern India and Pakistan) was among the earliest people to advantageously amalgamate spatial optimisation, maximisation and connectivity, albeit for economic gains. The design of one of its largest cities, Mohenjo-Daro, though on a smaller scale, incorporates a model to conglomerate trade activity to a core zone with direct connections to other key trade routes (Mckay, 1934).

Urbanists formed the foundations for planning philosophies following this design framework, emphasising the centre's role in cities.

Across history, urbanists continue to build on the idea that an urban centre is a critical component of a well-planned city. Burgess is among the first planners that recognised the role of a city core in integrating culture, business and finance to foster a favourable environment for economic growth (Yaguang, 2011).

Urban cores facilitate urban growth through the functions that occur within them. According to (Nooraddin, 2016), a city centre is "characterised by central urban functions, in particular, commercial (retail trade, handicraft-and-service, catering and tourism, financial and business services), communication-information, educational-scientific, cultural entertainment, sport-recreation, social-health protection and social-political activities". Urban cores represent zones where the political, economic and social converge.

This paper examines the transformation of Oxford Circus, London's critical retail core. It explores how a development plan to reconfigure London's West End birthed Europe's busiest retail "centre".

British architect John Nash designed Oxford Circus. The Circus itself is composed of two key streets, Oxford Street and Regent Street. While Nash's plan focused centrally on developing Regent Street, he recognised the potential economic ramifications of connecting his new street (Regent Street) to the existing Oxford Street, a retail hub, through his Circus design.

Circuses were introduced into Urban Planning in England by John Wood, the younger, a prominent English architect. The circus design is a ring of large structures that form a circle with three key entrances. Inspired by Palladian architecture, Wood's circus design connected town activity to a central focal point.

Nash forged his plan for Regent's Street and the Circus in cognisance of Wood's design.

Regent Street is a 1.3km long street. Plans for its development came following Prince Regent, later George IV's ambition to establish a prestigious metropolitan improvement scheme that would rival Paris' Rue de Rivoli (Rowan, 2017).

John Nash was among the three planners who proposed designs for this scheme. Nash, a planner and designer, urbanist ideas focused on the revival of Gothic and Renaissance architecture. Born in 1752, he began his design career under the sculptor turned architect, Sir Robert Taylor. Nash established his practice shortly after but went bankrupt by 1783 and moved to Wales. Nash achieved considerable success during his time there as he designed a series of gothic castles such as the Luscombe Castle in Devon and Caerhays Castle in Cornwall .

Following these feats, Nash returned to London in 1797, where he worked for the Office of Works, advising parliamentary commissions on new building structures. It was during this period that he submitted his development plan.

Nash's bold yet classical design style piqued the interest of the Crown commissioners in his plan. Alternative plans were submitted by Thomas Leverton and Thomas Chawner, who suggested a distinction between Regent Street and the less sophisticated Oxford Street. However, Nash's plan focused on a quadrant that would connect the upscale properties of Regent Street to the retail hub Oxford Street and extend through to St. James and Soho areas (Flinn, 2012).

Oxford Street is a major road that runs from Tottenham Court Road to Marble Arch. The street is 1.9km long and is entirely within the Westminster Borough, one of the core areas of Central London. Currently, the street and its adjacent intersections are explicitly zoned for commercial services, with over 300 shops and restaurants along the street (London, 1980).

Originally, Oxford Street was known as Tyburn Road. It was a part of the Via Trinobanita, one of the Roman structures connecting Hampshire and Essex via London, and served as one of the major routes in and out of the city. In the 16th Century, following Ralph Aggas' "Plan of London" publication where the street was described as the "Road to Oxford", it became known as Oxford Street.

The street's area was notoriously known for its proximity to the Tyburn gallows and slums and was often avoided by upper-class citizens. However, after removing the gallows in 1783, the Earl of Oxford purchased many of its surrounding fields and developed theatres, pubs and some residential property in the space (London, 1980).

Oxford Street's character further changed after the conversion of Portman Estate at the North end of Oxford Street to fashionable private houses; Oxford Street saw a change in its physical character. Furniture stores and department stores began to open up, and shortly after, the street was primarily retail stores, a characteristic that it retains today (Walford, 1878).

Planning and Designing the Circus

19th Century

Nash recognised that Oxford Street could be a vital node for Regent Street. He noted that it could become the primary shopping artery for the prestigious structures that were to exist on Regent Street. His plan proposed establishing a crescent-like street shape that would extend North from the St. James area to Oxford Street. He envisioned colonnaded structures that would complement the curved geometry of Regent Street. Nash arranged the geometry of the Circus so that Regent Street and Oxford Street would converge at a right angle— amalgamating the residential district with the retail district (University College London, Bartlett School of Architecture).

The designing of the Circus began early on in Nash's plan for Regent's Street development. It reflected "a far more disciplined and less picturesque approach to street design than the approach he [Nash] ultimately adopted in the critical years around 1820" (University College London, Bartlett School of Architecture). The elevation of the segment in the Circus embodied Palladian architecture, four main storeys with a hidden basement.

Nash proposed merging residential and retail properties, allocating the ground floor for shops and upper levels for residences— creating one of the first mixed-use buildings in the area. (University College London, Bartlett School of Architecture).

Nash's plan also took into account road use. He suggested a central railed off-area so that traffic did not move straight across through the Circus. As the early maps show, the commissioners never implemented this aspect of his plan.

The process of acquiring property for the construction of the Circus began in 1914. Less than half were allocated for the Circus' frontages, while the others were needed for the roadway. During construction, traders on the south of Oxford Street suffered considerably due to the extensive sewer excavation that preceded the making of Regent Street and the Circus.

The commercial value of Oxford Street made the process of relocation traders difficult. Nash entered negotiations with shopkeepers to rehouse them in one of the new locations in the Circus—saving the Crown from seeking new tenants and offering the traders continuity.

20th Century

As traffic between the Circus and its adjacent areas increased rapidly, plans to establish a station in the retail district were underway. On 30th July 1990, the Oxford Circus station was opened as part of the Central Line, which connected the area to the Borough of Kensington. The circus' station platforms were 325 feet long to accommodate six carriages alone.

In the first year after the station opened, there was recorded traffic to Oxford Circus that amounted to one million passengers. This led to expansion efforts to connect the Bakerloo and Victoria lines to Oxford Circus—creating a direct link from North and South London to the West End retail district (Horne, 2012).

In 1917, the 99 year-long lease of quadrants of the Circus was due to expire. It was then that the Commissioners of Woods and Forest decided that Oxford Circus would need to be rebuilt.

Before the leases' expiration, the commission welcomed plan proposals to redevelop the site. In 1910, Her Majesty's Office of Works selected Henry Tanner's design proposal (University College London, Bartlett School of Architecture).

Sir Henry Tanner was an English urban planner, surveyor and architect. Born in 1849, Tanner trained under architect Anthony Salvin. Similar to Nash, Tanner's designs often followed the French Renaissance style. His inspiration for the redevelopment plan of the Circus came largely from Ange-Jacques Gabriel's 18th-century French planning style.

Tanner's design focused on removing residences from the Circus and repurposing all the structures to retail. During this time, significant developments of areas adjacent to the Circus and the presence of the Underground station lessened concerns about rehousing displaced tenants. The creation of the Oxford Circus station provided more accessible access to properties in other parts of the city.

21st Century

Oxford Circus has undergone a series of significant renovations as it has grown to be the busiest shopping district in Europe, with half a million daily visitors (Westminster City Council, 2020). This unusual traffic into the area has led to its being labelled as one of the most polluted areas in Europe, from vehicular congestion and heavy pedestrian traffic.

In response, Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, proposed his Transport for London plan to pedestrianise the retail district in 2018. Khan's plan suggested placing seating and art pieces across the street instead of vehicular infrastructure (McElroy, 2021).

However, following polls collecting local attitudes towards pedestrianisation of the street, the Westminster City Council blocked Khan's plans. The council released a statement noting, "We believe there is a very strong democratic mandate that the pedestrianisation scheme that was under consideration is not what local people want. As a result, Westminster City Council has taken the pedestrianisation of Oxford Street off the table for good." (Burnett, 2018).

Other plans for the redevelopment of Oxford Circus are underway. Recently, the Westminster City Council revealed their renovation plans for the retail district under the new Oxford Street District design framework. Council leader Rachael Robathan unveiled a blueprint to reinvent the high streets, focusing on greening Oxford Circus.

The development and subsequent renovations of Oxford Circus is one among many planning feats to establish and maximise the use of the urban core for economic growth. However, as seen in this case, failure to plan for urban centres without accommodating potential outward growth foster unsustainable urban planning models. The necessity for continuous planning is reflected in American planner David Burnham's philosophy. Burnham fervently advocated for "long-range, comprehensive planning and rebuilding, rather than short-range, timid incrementalism." (Gale, 2021).

While Nash's and Tanner's plans successfully created a core retail district in London, both urbanists failed to account for the long-term impacts of concentrating entertainment and shopping services to one particular area in the city.

As seen with many urban core areas, the volume of human and vehicular traffic poses a significant public health issue with disintegrating air and land quality. Planners must consider the impacts of implementing design models and ensure accompanying solutions to remedy any negative externalities are included. A comprehensive analysis of each city plan created is necessary for supporting sustainable city growth and development models.

Citations

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