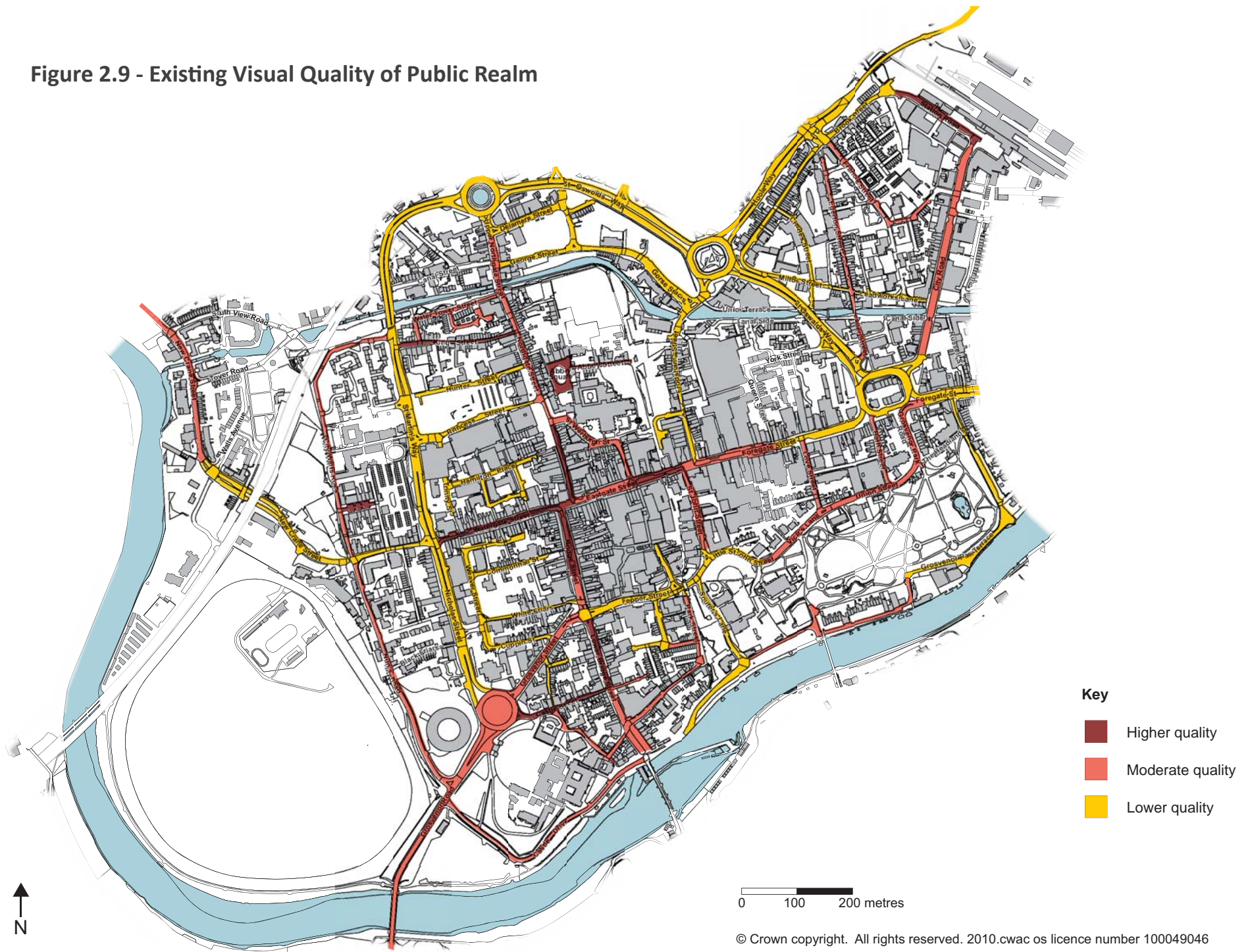


Figure 2.9 - Existing Visual Quality of Public Realm



Existing Public Realm Context

2.7 ~ Public Realm Condition, Quality and Character

Existing Public Realm Condition and Quality

Figure 2.9 illustrates the visual quality of the city centre's public realm. This is a relatively subjective judgement, which has taken into account the visual quality of the street but also its importance in relation to the city. In general, it is considered that the quality of Chester's public realm is very variable and soon deteriorates away from The Cross and its immediate environment.

Higher Quality Public Realm

As would be expected, the higher quality public realm extends from The Cross to include Watergate Street, the majority of Bridge Street (where stone setts are used in carriageway), the southern part of Northgate Street (south of the Town Hall Square) and parts of Eastgate Street where natural stone surfacing is found (the area highlighted as moderate quality is a concrete paved area). As indicated, these streets have typically received the most attention in the past (as key streets in the city) and have benefited from natural stone surfacing and well maintained furniture elements. Although the surfacing has been installed for a number of years, the visual quality of these areas of public realm is good. Although difficult to walk over, Abbey Square and Abbey Streets traditional stone setts and cobbles also create a higher visual quality to the public realm. In addition, Castle Street, King Street and Stanley Place still contain historic, natural stone surfaces. The station forecourt has recently been resurfaced with predominant use of natural stone. This can also be considered of a higher visual quality.

Lower Quality Public Realm

The majority of the ring road, Frodsham Street and 'backland' streets (within perimeter blocks) are considered of lower visual quality. The surfacing in these areas consists of concrete based products and tarmacadam, with many areas in poor repair. Poor quality boundary treatments and views of unattractive buildings, car parking, and service areas do not help to raise the quality. Souter's Lane and The Groves are also included in this category. The Groves is considered of lower visual quality relative to its importance as a key destination within the city. A mix of materials is found in this area including some natural stone as well as tarmacadam.

Moderate Quality Public Realm

The remaining streets are considered of moderate quality. Although natural stone products are not commonly used in these areas, generally surfacing is in reasonable repair and adjacent buildings and boundaries do not detract from the public realm.

Outside of the city walls this could be considered acceptable, given the lesser importance of these parts of the public realm.

Vernacular Character of Chester City Centre's Public Realm

A number of Chester's City Centre streets, particularly minor side streets, still display original historic vernacular paving materials and arrangements. The colour and nature of the natural paving found on these streets does much to establish and complement the historic architecture of the city, contributing to the underlying sense of place.



Historic view along Bridge Street

As described below this vernacular palette has been used as the basis for contemporary palettes of surfacing found on the principal 'Cross Streets'. This unified approach is interrupted by secondary streets that have been surfaced in non-natural and low quality materials. These detract from the townscape character and will need to be reconsidered to improve the overall quality and coherence of the public realm.



Weaver Street from Watergate Street Junction 1931-32



Traditional paving on Bunce Street

Footways and Use of Yorkstone Flags

Typically riven yorkstone flags are used for pavements and pedestrian alleys (see photo examples of Bunce Street). As the left hand example shows, and the historic photo of Weaver Street (bottom left), sandstone slabs also appear in setted carriageways as 'Wheelers' designed to take cart wheels. The example of Bunce Street (left) also shows more extensive use of sandstone slabs in the carriageway, acting as additional pedestrian footway where pavements are narrow. The use of yorkstone slabs has been replicated in the contemporary surfacing of pavements on the principal streets around The Cross.



Traditional paving to alley on Bunce Street

Kerbs

The majority of vernacular streets have narrow granite kerbs. The use of this material has been replicated in many more contemporary examples on principal streets, albeit in a wider format, which is not wholly inappropriate given the larger scale and importance of these routes. Granite kerbs are often accompanied by granite or setted channels as the examples below show.



Example of granite kerb with setted channel detail



Example of granite kerb with channel

Carriageways

The predominant carriageway material found on vernacular streets is sandstone setts. However, granite is used in some locations and is the preferred material used in contemporary setted carriageways on principal streets in the city.



Setted carriageway to Bridge Street 1900



Example of sandstone setts



Example of granite setts

As well as stone setts, there are a few examples of cobbles being used on vernacular streets. The images (right) provide examples of the use of river washed pebbles as cobbled surfacing to streets. These surfaces are difficult for pedestrians to use, making the presence of sandstone flags particularly important.



Cobbled surface with yorkstone 'wheelers' to Abbey Square



Cobbled surface with yorkstone pavement/doorsteps to Abbey Street



Cobbled surface to Shipgate Street/St Mary's Hill



Detail of cobbled surface

An additional natural material found on some minor residential streets within the city centre are blue clay pavers. Some have a smooth finish and some a diamond pattern (stable block paver).



Blue clay pavers to footways in Albion Place

As shown by the photographs overleaf, wide variation in the detailing and arrangement of this basic palette of natural stone materials are found in Chester. Collectively these features add to the richness of place and idiosyncrasies of individual streets.



Example of blue clay paver with diamond pattern.



Relevance to the PRDG

The following bullet points summarise the key points relating to existing public realm condition, quality and character which are to be addressed in the PRDG.

- The aim should be to extend the quality of the public realm beyond The Cross to at least meet the City Walls with greater and more consistent use of natural stone surfacing. On some streets this quality should extend further to strengthen connections to the river, in particular.
- The basic vernacular palette of natural stone materials in Chester should continue to be replicated in the design of Chester's principal streets, as well as preserved and maintained on the historic minor streets in which they are currently found.
- Local variations in the application and detailing of materials should continue to be a feature of Chester's streets.
- High quality concrete products for secondary and minor streets should be carefully chosen to complement the natural stone materials used elsewhere.

Examples of variation in detailing and arrangement of vernacular materials



King Street, Chester