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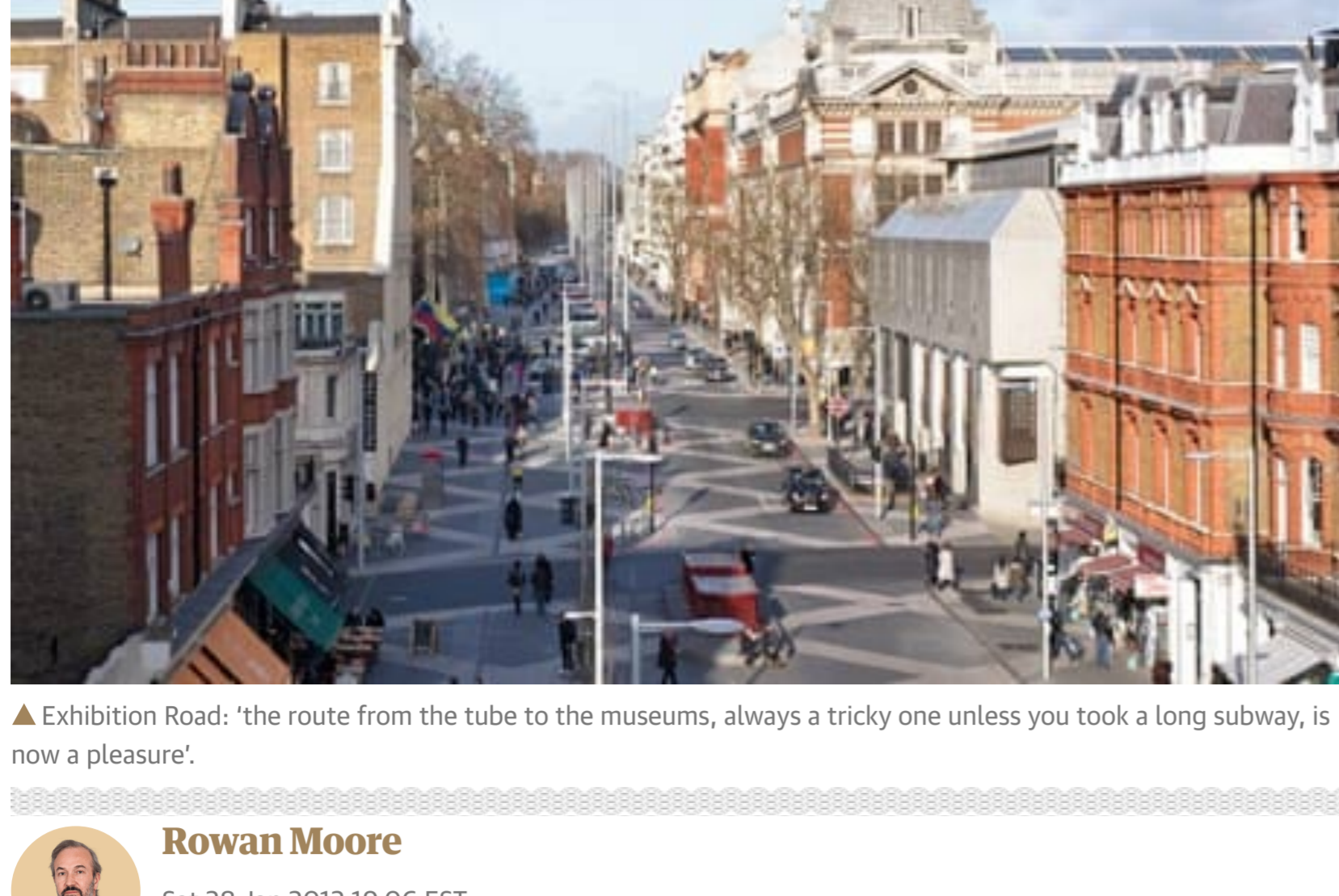
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Exhibition Road, London - review

After years of wrangling, the new Exhibition Road in South Kensington, home to many of Britain's great museums, proves a triumph for the 'shared space' movement



▲ Exhibition Road: 'the route from the tube to the museums, always a tricky one unless you took a long subway, is now a pleasure'.



Rowan Moore

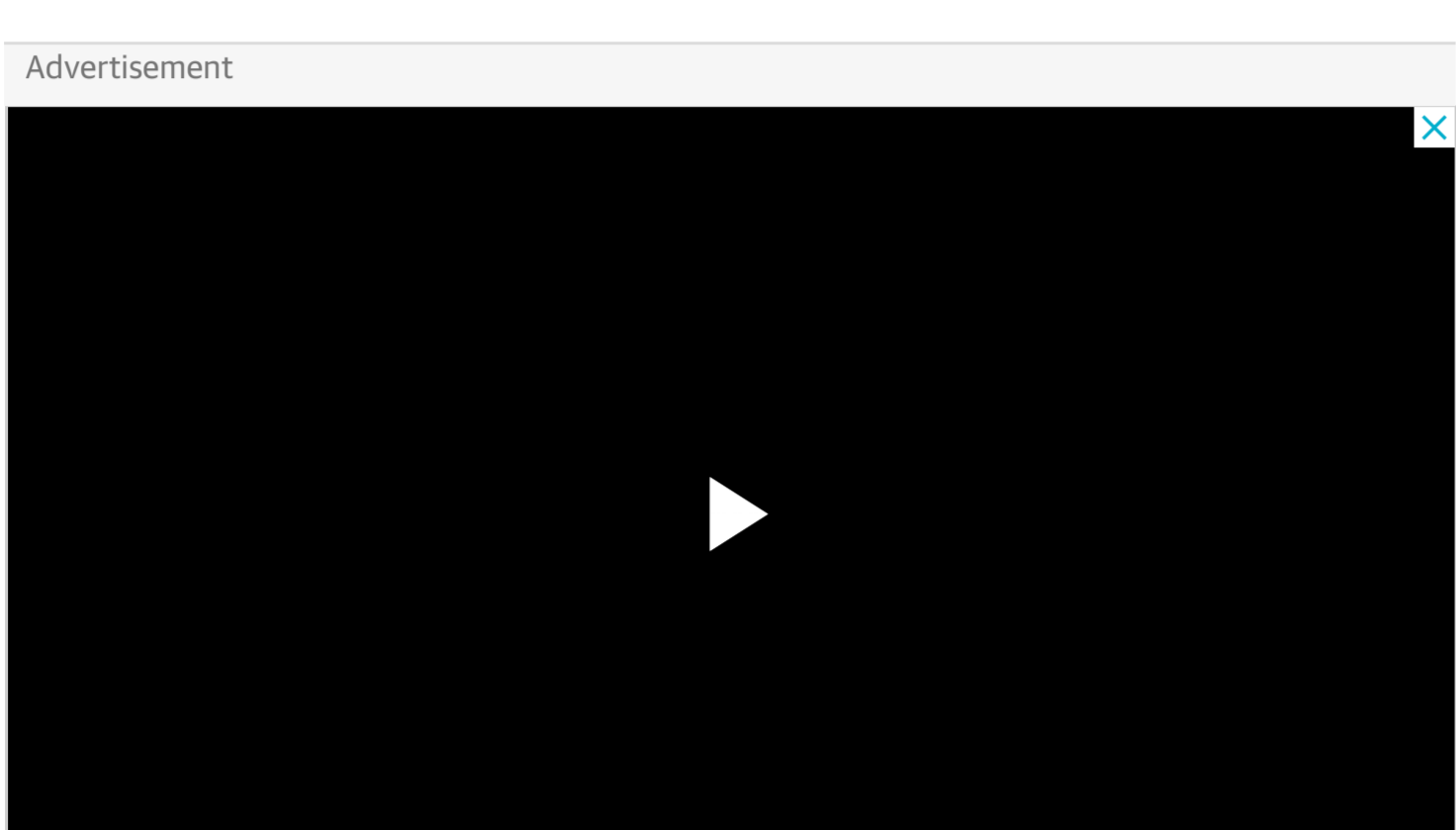
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The first thing to say about the remaking of Exhibition Road in London is how sane it largely is. Its concept is unimpeachable - to make a thoroughfare lined with famous museums and other institutions into a place more pleasant for the 11 million pedestrians who visit them each year. Its execution is well-judged, apart from the not-small detail that blind people find it alarming. Yet it has taken 18 years since something along these lines was first put forward, plus £29.2m, a court case and endless consultations, to get to this point. How difficult can it be to lay a pavement? Very, it would seem.

The road was first developed following the Great Exhibition of 1851 and has the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Science Museum, Imperial College, the Royal Geographical Society and the Goethe Institute along its length, not to mention the Polish Hearth Club and a curious, spiritual-modernist-ish building that houses the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



Like many spaces made in the aftermath of expos and world fairs, it has always had an uncertain air: it is wide and straight, which gives it a sense of purpose, but the biggest museums present only their side entrances to it, while strips of what were originally private houses blur its identity. Is it a grand avenue of culture, a convenient side street or residential? If it is the first, it is too variegated; if the last, it is too broad.

Its vagueness, and its air of having something lacking, provoked in 1994 something called the Albertopolis project, a grandiose plan whereby the road and surrounding areas would be comprehensively transformed in time for the turn of the millennium, to designs by Norman Foster, and using millions from the newly formed National Lottery. It foundered on its own ambition and the difficulty of getting many institutions to collaborate. Next, Daniel Libeskind proposed the Spiral, a large, jagged, teetering addition to the V&A whose aim seemed to be to startle Exhibition Road out of its doziness. This, too, failed to fly.

Then, in 2003, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea decided to have a go. The project was taken on by Daniel Moylan, then deputy leader of the borough, now deputy chairman of Transport for London. Moylan also pushed forward the "de-cluttering" of Kensington High Street in west London - the removal of barriers, bollards and signs ("really good quality rubbish", in his words) that were deemed essential to safety, but turned out not to be so. More or less by accident, he claims, he has found himself "at the forefront of a movement" campaigning for more civilised streets.

With the encouragement of the architect and mayoral adviser Richard Rogers, a competition was held for the redesign of the street. The likes of Zaha Hadid and David Chipperfield took part, and Jeremy Dixon and Ed Jones won. Dixon and Jones have a record of working in august cultural locations, such as the National Gallery and the Royal Opera House, and it is to their designs, albeit changed in several ways since the competition, that the road has now been changed.



▲ 'The theory is that if walkers and drivers occupy the same space they'll behave more responsibly'. Photograph: Olivia Woodhouse

Its big idea, which originated with Moylan, was to create a "shared space" whereby pedestrians, cyclists and vehicles all occupy the same surface, without kerbs or barriers to separate them. It seems risky, but the theory is that if walkers and drivers can see that they are occupying the same space, they will behave more responsibly. The concept was the invention of the Dutch traffic engineer Hans Monderman, who used to walk backwards into dense traffic to demonstrate that drivers would be sufficiently human not to run him over. Exhibition Road is the largest example of such a space in Britain, although it is not the purest, as there is some slight differentiation between carriageway and footway.

Dixon and Jones's main contribution has been direct and has two elements. They have arranged the new paving into a broad diamond pattern of pale granite on dark, put all the street lighting on to a row of tall, silvery masts. This gives a unity to the various characters of the street, which at different places has cafes, grand museums, colleges and terraced houses.

It also allows the architecture of the different buildings, which runs from the declamatory to the discreet, to speak for itself. One virtue of Dixon and Jones's design is its lack of rhetoric, which, if anything, could go even further - the marching lighting masts are arguably a little too intrusive.

The overall effect is of generosity and calm. Crowds can flow more happily over the paving and the route from South Kensington tube to the great museums, which was always a tricky one unless you took a long subway, is now a pleasure. The road is a place where you might want to be, rather than just a means of getting someone else. It is not fussy and prescriptive, as public space improvements often are. A particular joy is that there is no pointless public art; it was rightly decided that, with sculptures both outside and inside the museums, there was already enough art to go round.

But it has not been easy to achieve and it is not without compromises. Every possible interest and regulatory body has had its say. The question of residents' parking places, which in this part of London are valued above diamonds, has been fraught and could have been fatal to the project. As a result, the spaces are there, inconspicuously but not offensively, little spots of private right in the public realm of the road.

The lack of kerbs is good for people in wheelchairs, but can be disconcerting for blind people, as a result of which Guide Dogs took the borough to court, which must have been an uncomfortable experience for the politicians. Now there are grooves in the pavement to mark where the kerb would have been, and the borough says that the road is being monitored to see how well it works for all disabled groups. The people at Guide Dogs are still not convinced, saying that a controlled crossing is also necessary, which may well be installed. Final judgment on the success of the scheme has to be suspended until these issues have been worked out in practice.

The thing about public space is that it is public, which means that potentially anyone can have a say in it. It is prone to vociferous objectors: another Moylan-Dogers project - for rearranging the traffic in Sloane Square - was shot down by opponents whom Moylan, who is not shy of speaking his mind, calls "determined and mendacious" and "completely hysterical".

So it is, in other words, very difficult to lay a pavement, at least one that is different from all the others, but Exhibition Road is finally there. It's a special case, in that few streets in Britain can match its cultural load, but its essential principles can be transferred to more modest places. At such time as other local authorities have the money to do work like this again, it shows how it can be done.

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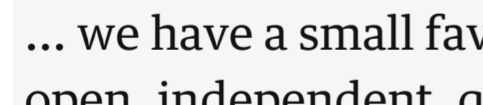
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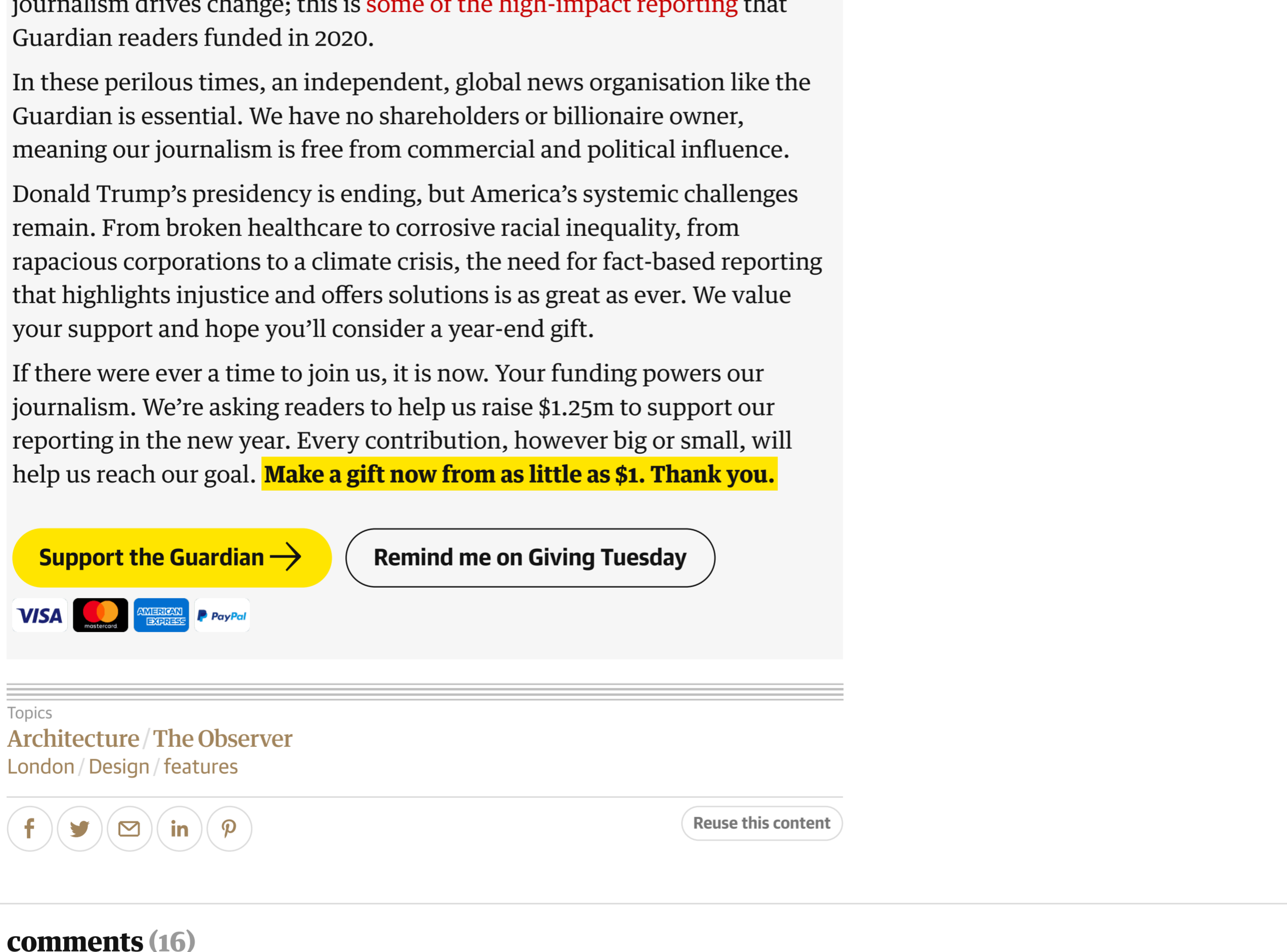
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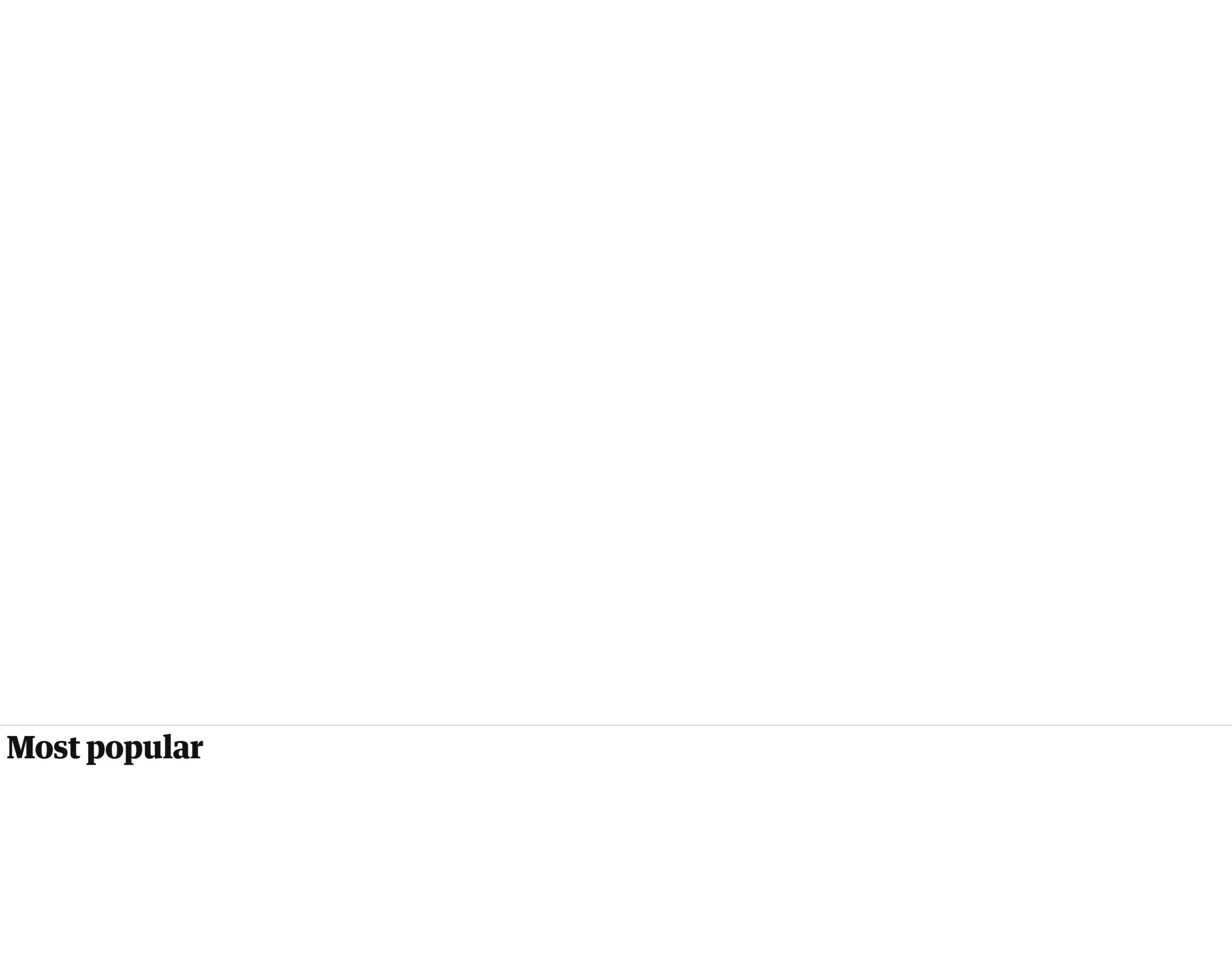
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