

# This hideous new footbridge underlines the poor state of design standards in the UK

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The other day, I arrived at my local station, Marks Tey, a semi-rural stop on the Great Eastern Mainline to London, and walked up the steps to the bridge across the tracks. Hurrying, because my train would arrive at any second, I registered that the plastic barriers that had been placed inside the concrete balustrade and which had been an irritating trip hazard for several months had disappeared.

A moment later, I saw that the concrete balustrade had also disappeared and in its place was a 2m-high, grey-painted steel plate with a grey handrail at its midpoint. I could no longer see down onto the tracks, nor onto either platform. Nor could I be seen by anyone else at all, as the steel wall turned the corner at both ends of the bridge. I was, suddenly, in a blind alley, entirely cut off from the world.

I snapped a photo, in disbelief. How was a high-walled trough, with no sightlines, the right solution to replacing the – admittedly ageing – concrete balustrade? I did what you do in 2025 and posted it on my LinkedIn, with a suitably cranky comment.

The post racked up comments and likes. Everyone was eager to express their outrage at the egregious lack of thought that had gone into this minor footbridge replacement. How could they possibly be so casual about making people feel safe? I would never want to walk across there. Imagine a girl late at night having to use it. Network Rail's own design guide states that making people feel safe is essential – they ignored their own document. Yes, everyone understood that they need to prevent people from jumping onto the track, or throwing things onto passing trains. But there were so many ways that could have been achieved without creating a blind alley. Good designers have designed beautiful, functional and safe footbridges that are being installed just a few stops down the line.

Every policy statement, every plan, every strategy states its aim is to ensure sustainable, 'high-quality', people-centred design. Network Rail's 68-page *Principles of Good Design* is no exception – it is a word salad of aspiration. It is one of 36 different design manuals and guides on their website, including three officially sanctioned designs for footbridges – all carefully and considerately designed – as well as a photographic survey of 100 beautiful footbridges



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from across the network to act as inspiration.

But we have become inured to a severe cognitive dissonance between these fine words and the reality of what gets done. People – perfectly decent human beings just trying to do their job – had decided on that steel-walled solution to my footbridge. They had, no doubt, taken part in many meetings where dimensions of safety were balanced alongside cost, ease of construction, risk of failure, maintenance implications and more. Perhaps they even raised concerns that the preferred 'solution' would contravene their own design guide. But, at the end of the day, there was no appetite to do better for this station, with its annoying concrete bridge over a busy mainline. Design principles were disregarded: cost and convenience won out.

Network Rail is not alone in having a proliferation of ambitious, widely publicised design policies alongside a culture of ignoring them. Changing this will require everyone involved to search deeply into their own behaviour and psychology and to look wholesale at how their people – not just the projects they oversee – are managed, supported and critiqued. We have all heard 'that will do', 'it will only get trashed anyway', or 'it's not worth it' win the day, while those who try to advocate for the real experience of people in places are ignored and 'managed out'. Risk mitigation, cost reduction, avoiding legal challenge and justifying mediocrity through lengthy reports are rewarded: creativity and integrity are not.

Writing policy statements is easy. Designing and making great places is hard. Making the lived reality match the aspiration can't be achieved through more checklists and tick-boxes. It needs everybody involved to actually care, even when the project is small and the place is out of the public eye. Until that culture changes, there will always be projects that fall through the gaps. There will always be communities that are treated as second class.

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