

Urban proposes three concepts, optics, place and content

[Design](#), [Architecture](#)



Urban design looks at designing for towns and cities, the streets and its spaces.

The creation of these places in urban context are designed to provide amenities for the community as well as granting growth and experience to the people in the place. There is an art to creating these places of which Gordon Cullen explores in *Concise Townscape*. This essay will explore how designing cities in context is an art form through the relationships of the urban elements. Gordon Cullen seeks to explain how buildings brought together show more than just architecture but art in the urban setting.

This art goes on to create an emotional impact to the viewer leaving an experience with them as they journey through the city. Cullen explains how the elements of the surroundings produce a drama witnessed by the viewer as it is “ through vision that the environment is apprehended”. He proposes three concepts, Optics, Place and Content and how they help paint the art form of a city. This essay will consider Cullen’s theory of a townscape design, at a viewer’s perspective, by applying the theories to Leicester. Cullen talks about vision as a creator of an experience an emotional impact and stimulator of memory. Travelling through a townscape, he believes that the urban arrangement of the elements, buildings, trees road etc, should be designed and manipulated together to form an art of juxtaposition and relationship that impact a viewer.

Cullen considers three aspects concerning vision that help create the art of environment, beginning with Optics. It considers the view at the level of a person walking at a consistent speed in a space and as a result a scene

unveiling itself to the person dramatically. (Cullen, 1961 p9, 17) Through this serial vision, one can read and observe the constructed space in the urban landscaping. As you travel along the path, the existing view is replaced with emerging views.

(Cullen, 1961 p9) Therefore, suggesting the environment should notify you what you should look for with or without your consent. Following from Optics, you must be in a Place for you to see and experience the environment, and particular places to arouse different emotions. Cullen characterizes a place's experience as one that creates a sense of position, ' put one in a cave and they feel enclosed, put another on a cliff and they feel depth and exposure'.

(Cullen, 1961 p10) Take for example New Walk in Leicester, the tree promenade offers serial of vision between the tree trunks as one advances down the path. After approaching the first open space, Museum Square, the space is surrounded by hazards which are the trees and fencing. (Cullen, 1961 p56, 89) These hazards act as a physical barrier to the viewer granting only visual access until you reach the entrances. The sense of ' I am here, I am outside the Museum square' is conceived. (Cullen, 1961 p9) All those feelings are created regarding the manipulation of the environmental elements.

Finally, the contents within the urban environment add onto the effects of the townscape through how the town fabric, colour, texture, scale or relationship, are perceived by the viewer. How creatively and level of conformity is put together through the contents can also generate emotions to the viewer. (Cullen, 1961 p11, 57) This linking to Leicester is through

looking at New Walk as majority of the building façades are brick material creating an identity that follows throughout the walk notifying you your position in the place. To explore Cullen's three aspects, different areas in Leicester were explored in that as you walk through presents a new scene to the viewer whilst stimulating a sense of place. Following the Castle View photos, the path begins looking past two buildings following the road that creates a link to the other space notifying you that there is more down the path. As you look through the (Turret Gateway) archway nothing is revealed to you however on top of the Turret Gateway you can see a building that is there clarifying a place exists there.

(Cullen, 1961 p10, 35) This proves Cullen's theory of the know here and the unknown there which creates anticipation. (Cullen, 1961 p49) Advancing under the Turret gateway, you enter an enclosed space with no visible exist. Looking ahead the building in front, Leicester Castle, sits at a deflected angle informing the viewer to keep on advancing for there is more to the space. Photos 5 and 6 shows the enclosure at a complete as you look around.

The space offers the viewer contrasting buildings all showing content from the different periods in time. The refurbished 11th century Leicester castle to the 12th Century building, St Mary De Castro church to the Castle gates that forms a bridge over the exist of the enclosure into another unknown. (Cullen, 1961 p29, 43, 49) The place is considered for the use of both cars and pedestrians however prioritises pedestrians to cars. This is through the study of the floorscape which instructs the use of the space.

(Cullen, 1961 p54, 121-2) In photo 2 we can see the tarmac road cut off by cobble road informing vehicle drivers that this isn't their path to take and the barrier finalising that caution. In photo 7 we can see that the floor is flagstone, the pattern used to mark pedestrian footpaths that lead on to the desired buildings. Also at this point the floor pattern returns to the tarmac road notifying vehicles this is their zone.

The content explored in the area is the relationship of the contrasting materials, textures and colours of the periods surrounding one another to form the enclosure allowing the person to travel through time with the materials before exiting out to the unknown again under the Castle gates. (Cullen, 1961 p60) Leicester Castle does however hide the medieval timber building with the 19th century façade of brick. Given the history of the area the enclosure acts as its own defence to the prying eyes of those outside of the history contained within.

Even after exiting the enclosed space, St Mary de Castro gives a final performance of content of the intricate façade that leads back into the enclosure. (Cullen, 1961 p65) Another serial progression is at the beginning of Guildhall Lane. As the viewer looks down the path they see two uses of the floorscape, the road for cars and pedestrian paths. This creates a narrow road. (Cullen, 1961 p45, 121) Looking ahead the road appears to end at the white wall building only this building creates a sense of closure.

This is different to an enclosure as it allows you to take in one place before moving on to the next. (Cullen, 1961 p47) It is not until one progresses

further do they see the next place. The road also has a sense of fluctuation from the path opening when the person reaches the church which is a surprise display hidden by the street although hinted before. This stimulates the awareness of their position moving through narrow to wide to narrow path. (Cullen, 1961 p46) It also gives a breather to the viewer and time to take in the church whilst walking at their uniformed pace. Cullen labels humans as 'gregarious' and have the need to gather and socialise. (Cullen, 1961 p103) He describes how cities are designed to feature social characteristics. Some of the characteristics of social components mentioned in the book are occupied territories.

This type of characteristic is a type of possession within a place in forms of furniture outside shops, canopies that provide shade and shelter. (Cullen, 1961 p20-21) As seen in the pictures below many of the streets in Leicester contain occupied territories that allow the gathering of people. In Guildhall lane photo we can see a shop that attracts the eye from the bright colour and the shop marks its territory from the use of canopy. The Silver street photo shows other shops marking theirs using furniture or barriers.

Other times these characteristics are portrayed by focal points located in the spaces. (Cullen, 1961 p26) A well-known focal point in Leicester is the Haymarket Memorial clock tower located at the five popular streets, Gallowtree, Humberstone Gate, Haymarket, Church Gate and Eastgates, and acts as the important meeting point to everyone on the mentioned streets. It is a major focal point of the city as it used to gather many for the celebration of Christmas or winning the premier league. Focal points can also be found in

smaller spaces for example in the Museum Square does the big horse chestnut tree act as a focal point in the site. It informs the people of the centre of the square, offers shelter and shade as well as all paths centred around it.

To conclude, the study of the Leicester's townscape, its scenes, and analyse it with Cullen's theories does prove the aspects he proposed. The exploration of how as a person walks they can experience new scenes from their path yet still have a sense of being in the same place. A dramatic effect is created and is emphasized more from the content use of a building as explained in Castle view how the textures of the different periods are used to create an atmosphere of the past.

Although not all components from the book were explored the few selected certainly prove that if the right components manipulated together can produce the right form of art in the environment. Leicester's busy streets do not lose out on creating a dramatic townscape as it still has the juxtaposition of different periodic buildings around one another which is what Cullen believes creates the art of townscape. However, as architecture advances the aim for a townscape is being lost to the fact that they are being designed to meet peoples demands than needs.