

Architecture and urban design are among the very few truly inescapable – and, therefore, public – art forms. With movements such as ‘City Beautiful’ in the US and ‘Townscape’ in the UK establishing a predominantly visual perspective on development, the visual dimension of urban design was perhaps its dominant dimension until at least the 1960s. Even the Modern Movement can be criticised for its preoccupation with the visual expression of many of its key concepts rather than with the essence of the concepts themselves. The expression of function, for example, was often more important than buildings or places actually being functional. While the visual composition of both architecture and urban space is a vitally important component of the urban design remit, and profoundly affects the human qualities of places, it needs to be understood alongside the other dimensions discussed in this book.

This section presents a set of four chapters exploring the spatial and visual character of urban environments/design. Chapter 20 is **Gordon Cullen’s** introduction to the first edition (1961) of his book *Townscape* (Architectural Press, London – second edition published 1971). While a number of writers have made significant contributions to contemporary townscape theory (e.g. Sitte, 1889; Sharp, 1946; 1948; Gibberd, 1953; Worskett, 1969; Tugnutt and Robertson, 1987), the modern ‘townscape’ approach has always been closely associated with Gordon Cullen. Cullen’s beautifully illustrated essays on the subject initially formed a series of articles in the *Architectural Review* during the mid and late 1950s and subsequently appeared in book form as *Townscape* (1961), later republished as *The Concise Townscape* (1971).

One of the classic urban design texts, Cullen’s introduction succinctly encapsulates his main ideas and his contribution to urban design. His argument was a contextualist one in which the whole was greater than the sum of the individual parts. Moreover, he argued that the urban environment is not typically experienced as a static composition. It is experienced in some form of dynamic, emerging, unfolding and temporal sequence. To describe this, Cullen conceived the concept of ‘serial vision’, further arguing that the urban environment should be considered and designed from the point of view of the moving person (see also the discussion of time in Section Seven).

Chapter 21 is drawn from **Edward T. White’s** 1999 book, *Path–Portal–Place: Appreciating Public*

Space in Urban Environments (Architectural Media Ltd, Tallahassee). Like Cullen’s work, White presents a well-illustrated discussion of the key visual and spatial qualities of the urban environment. This little known contribution to the urban design literature is useful in the way it succinctly summarises these key concepts. The article’s value is its three-part structure, focusing on ‘path’, ‘portal’ and ‘place’. Path equates to ‘street’ and may be regarded as a more movement-oriented space. Place equates to ‘square’ and, in turn, may be regarded as a more static space. Portal refers to thresholds and transitions between spaces and between the public and private realms.

The urban environment’s visual-aesthetic character derives from the combination of its spatial and visual qualities. The visual qualities derive from the surfaces that define the space – that is, the design of surrounding buildings (i.e. the walls to the urban space); the design of the floor; and the design of the array of street furniture within the space. Chapters 22 and 23 both concentrate on façade design and the design of ‘urban’ architecture generally. ‘Urban’ architecture can be considered to be architecture that responds to and contributes positively both to its context and to the definition of the public realm. This generally excludes the design of buildings as freestanding objects in space except as an occasional element. The value of both chapters lies not only in reminding urban designers of the importance of architectural design in contributing to the character of urban spaces, but in also reminding architects and their clients of the ‘urban obligations’ of their designs and developments – that is, in Tibbalds’ words, the place matters most (see Section One).

Chapter 22 is **Sherban Cantacuzino’s** ‘Buildings in depth’, which originally formed part of the Royal Fine Art Commission’s inquiry, *What Makes a Good Building?* (1994) (RFAC, London).¹ The RFAC report brought together a number of the ‘great-and-the-good’ to discuss what makes a good building and to identify some guiding principles. The process identified six criteria – ‘order and unity’, ‘expression’, ‘integrity’, ‘plan and section’, ‘detail’, and ‘integration’. However, recognising the need to avoid turning generally desirable principles into dogmatic imperatives, the report stressed that a building could embody every criterion and still not be a ‘good’ building, and, conversely, could be a ‘good’ building

¹ The functions of the Royal Fine Art Commission were taken over by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, formed in 2000.