



FIGURE AND GROUND: AN ENGLISH VIEW OF THE CONSERVATION OF HISTORIC PUBLIC SPACES

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ABSTRACT: This paper considers some aspects of the way historic public space is understood in England, drawing on a selection of relevant guidance and research published by Historic England. This builds a picture of how public spaces are dealt with in official heritage publications in England, and how this relates to international discussion, particularly the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach. This is followed by some reflections on figure-ground mapping, which leads to a brief discussion of the “Townscape” campaign of *The Architectural Review*. The paper concludes with reflections on the implications for conservation arising from broader perception of city as cultural landscape.

KEYWORDS: historic urban landscape; Historic England; change; townscape; Gordon Cullen

1. Historic England Guidance

Central to all of Historic England's guidance is *Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance* (Historic England 2008). Despite a controversial and unsuccessful attempt at revision in 2018, it remains the organisation's core guidance document. It explicitly bases its definition of authenticity on *The Nara Document on Authenticity* (ICOMOS 1994). Its methodology is an adaptation of the Burra Charter's fourfold structure of values, and managing change is at the heart of the document's definition of conservation (Historic England 2008, 7). While the document itself is largely silent on public space, under the heading "Assessing Heritage Significance" there is some talk of "characterisation":

Extensive mapping, description, understanding and assessment – "characterisation" – can facilitate rapid analysis of large areas, both urban and rural. Its aim is to help people recognise how the past has shaped the present landscape, by identifying the distinctive historic elements of an area, and explaining past contexts of particular places within it. (Historic England 2008, 36)

Here, "landscape" is used in an inclusive sense, as an overarching term for both urban and rural environment.

Beneath *Conservation Principles* sits a multiplicity of guidance documents for a range of different audiences, including several that deal with aspects of public space. *The Setting of Heritage Assets* (Historic England 2017c) deals with the impact on a given historic building or changes to their immediate vicinity rather than considering external spaces as entities worthy of conservation in their own right. While the document makes no reference to Historic Urban Landscape, it does include a definition based on the European Landscape Convention (Florence 2000): "To avoid uncertainty in discussion of setting, a landscape is 'an area, as perceived by people, the character of which is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors'" (Historic England 2017c, 3). The document proposes a "staged approach to proportionate decision-taking"; having identified which heritage assets are affected by a proposed development, and having assessed what role those settings and views play in the heritage asset's significance, the effect of development is assessed. It is explicitly stated that this effect can be beneficial as well as harmful (Historic England 2017c, 8, 12). The fourth stage is then to "[e]xplore ways to maximise enhancement and avoid or minimise harm," with enhancement including such things as restoring lost historic views and "introducing new views [...] that add to the public experience of the asset" (Historic England 2017c, 14).

Conservation areas are another important topic, with the key guidance contained in *Conservation Area Appraisal Designation and Management* (Historic England 2019). The principal audience for this document is local authority planning departments and conservation officers, and it covers everything from the initial identification of potential conservation areas to their management and periodic review. An initial summary states that the document "supports the management of change in a way that conserves and enhances the character and appearance of historic areas through conservation area appraisal, designation and management" (Historic England 2019, II). The predominant concern is for "open space" in

general, admittedly including its townscape role (Historic England 2019, 23), rather than the identity and character of public spaces in their own right.



Understanding Place

Historic Area Assessments



Fig. 1. Cover of *Understanding Place* (Historic England 2017a)

Understanding Place (Historic England 2017a; fig. 1) is a separate document that defines Historic Area Assessment (HAA) and outlines how to carry one out. HAAs are a practical tool developed to establish the character of a historic area, often in anticipation of proposed redevelopment; the opening summary states that their purpose is to help planners, developers, communities and heritage professionals, among others, in “understanding how the past is encapsulated in today’s landscape, explaining why it has assumed its present form and highlighting its more significant elements” (Historic England 2017a, II).

The document (Historic England 2017a, 1) states that HAAs typically address a broad range of factors:

- how and why a place has come to look the way it does;
- relationships of buildings to open spaces, street patterns and boundaries;

- views in and out of confined spaces;
- building scale, type, materials, current use, etc.;
- the character of a given area, which can be derived from a subtle mixture of particular and shared characteristics.

The approach is applicable across a wide variety of landscape types, including towns, villages, hamlets, industrial areas, dispersed or rural settlements and even linear infrastructure such as canals or railways. The understanding of landscape in this document is therefore very inclusive, and the methodology comprehensive in its coverage.

The introduction situates HAAs in the broader context of heritage assessment, noting that it has shifted focus from individual buildings or sites to a more holistic approach aiming to define a given area's "broader character with a view to retention or the management of change" (Historic England 2017a, 3). Narrative is presented as the key aspect in the way changes in a given area are accounted for:

An essential way of presenting how areas change is in the form of a narrative, and this will always form an important component of an HAA. Narratives focus attention on causes and effects, influences and constraints, and should give texture and interest to the physical manifestations of change. (Historic England 2017a, 29; cf. also Walter 2020b)

While the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach is never explicitly mentioned, this inclusive and holistic approach, combined with positive engagement with the question of change, suggests this guidance is well aligned with HUL principles.

Streets for All is a suite of documents that deals explicitly with public space and comprises a national document (Historic England 2018b), supported by nine regional documents that contextualise the advice for specific areas, such as the East of England (Historic England 2018c). The principal audience for these documents are highways engineers, planners as well as urban and landscape designers; the summary states that the document "looks at making improvements to public spaces without harm to their valued character, including specific recommendations for works to surfaces, street furniture, new equipment, traffic management infrastructure and environmental improvements" (Historic England 2018b, II). While there is stress on the importance of protecting the distinctiveness of the public realm, the focus remains mostly on practical issues, with minimal discussion of the theoretical basis for action, and no references to international norms.

Finally, among the twenty or so listing selection guides Historic England publishes for its officers is one titled *Street Furniture* (Historic England 2017b). This document deals with three categories: structures relating to highways (including road and pavements surfaces), public utilities (such as drinking fountains and hydrants), and communications infrastructure. Examples of separately listed structures include the granite-block street surface along the length of Fore Street, St Ives in Cornwall, historic direction signs and historic telephone boxes. Some preliminary conclusions can be drawn from this brief overview. First, there is some engagement with the idea of the urban realm as a landscape, though these references are typically more allusive than substantive. Second, focus is broadened from individual buildings

to a more holistic perception of the urban environment, while change is acknowledged as legitimate and potentially beneficial. And third, there is minimal engagement with international norms, and no reference at all to the HUL framework, which has rapidly developed over the last two decades with the *Vienna Memorandum* (UNESCO 2005), leading to the *Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape* (UNESCO 2011). Indeed, this disconnect is underlined by the existence of *Urban Landscapes* (Historic England 2018a), another selection guide, whose subject is not HUL but the listing of parks and gardens in urban settings – that is, landscape in the narrower sense.

Lack of reference to HUL is perhaps less surprising in documents with a more practical focus, something characteristic of most of Historic England's output; this rather speaks to a view of practice as separate from theory than develops a particular stance on HUL itself. However, HUL is not mentioned at all in the otherwise comprehensive Historic England Research Report published in December 2022 and entitled *Strategically Assessing the Historic Landscape's Sensitivity and Capacity in Relation to Change* (Herring 2022). This report does reference multiple international charters, including the 2013 version of the Burra Charter, which post-dates the *Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape* (UNESCO 2011). Taken together with other publications, this does suggest a deliberate choice not to engage with HUL, even while much of the guidance is broadly compatible with it. Indeed, the only obvious reference to HUL in Historic England documentation is an opinion piece by Michael Turner relating to the seventieth anniversary of the Town and Country Planning Act (Turner 2017). Overall, the described silence on HUL is significant.

2. Figure and ground

In an urban context, the Historic Area Assessment guidance implicitly acknowledges the symbiotic relationship between public spaces and the buildings that form them. This is confirmed for example in the reference to “the relationships of buildings to open spaces, street patterns and boundaries” (Historic England 2017a, 1), as noted above. Certainly, this relation has been a constant in the grammar of traditional urbanism until the beginning of the modern age. It might be the outcome of overt design – as with the baroque reshaping of Rome by Sixtus V – or more simply the product of the tradition devoted to “good order,” with a generally shared understanding of what “good” urban space looks like.

In his celebrated *City Planning According to Artistic Principles*, Camillo Sitte criticizes modern, late-nineteenth-century city planning with its “modern majestic and monumental buildings being usually seen against the most awkward of public squares and the most badly divided lots” ([1889] 2006, 138). Sitte analysed the public space of a large number of traditional cities, using examples from Austria, Germany, France and Italy. He argued that the success of these cities, which had grown incrementally and organically, has been related to the quality of their public spaces and their relation with the buildings that form them. This is conventionally referred to as the balance of figure and ground. Sitte illustrates the spatial continuity of traditional towns with well over one hundred figure-ground diagrams, with buildings shaded in a dark poché against the ground of white space (fig. 2; see also fig. 4). Sitte additionally marks in black

certain key public buildings – typically churches – demonstrating how they are part of the town’s fabric rather than sitting in splendid isolation in the modern manner. He is particularly scathing of the contemporary habit of placing buildings in the centre of a site or square “so that there is space all around it. [...] Such an exposed building will always appear like a cake on a serving platter” (Sitte [1889] 2006, 166).

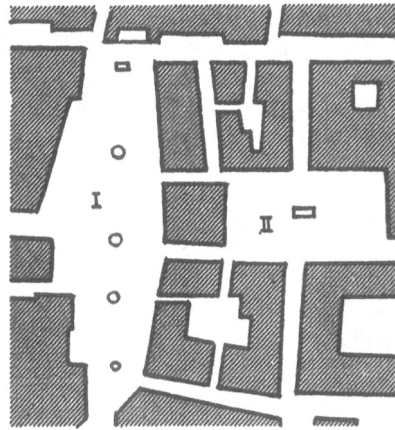


Fig. 2. Figure-ground plan of Piazza Erbe (I) and Piazza dei Signori (II), Verona (after fig. 34 in Sitte [1889] 2006, 186).

Once modernist urbanism flourished in the twentieth century, Sitte became deeply unfashionable. With the focus on the design of individual buildings, figure triumphed over ground, and modernist urbanism became characterised by unintended and incoherent emptiness between buildings, which Roger Trancik ([1986] 2007, 72) has aptly termed “antispaces.” By contrast, as Collins and Collins describe, “[t]he continuity of space, in which buildings were mere instances or provided a transitory framework, and the continuity of time, which caused a perpetual evolution of the urban fabric, were for Sitte the fundamental aspects of older towns” (Collins & Collins 2006, 14). Those twin forms of continuity – spatial and temporal – now undergird the HUL approach, demonstrating how Sitte has returned to relevance in the late-twentieth-century rediscovery of context.

Different eras of urbanism can be identified using the analysis of figure and ground. It can be argued that the same can be said of conservation approaches, with nineteenth- and much of twentieth-century conservation being concerned with the identification, collection and preservation of discrete buildings of merit for art history, initially with little concern for context. The Venice charter does state that “[t]he concept of a historic monument embraces not only the single architectural work but also the urban or rural setting,” but this is conceived as providing evidential support “of a particular civilization, a significant development or a historic event” (ICOMOS 1964, art. 1). Simply adding a preservation zone around an individual building or group does little to move beyond the usual priority of object over context. It is only with the transcending of such boundaries by reading historic places in terms of landscape – integral to HUL thinking – that this dominance of figure over ground is challenged.

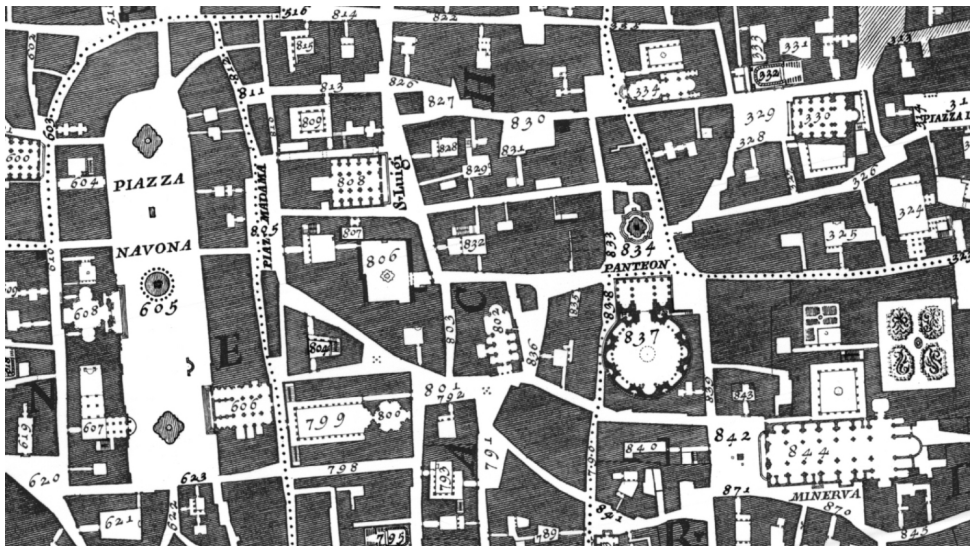


Fig. 3. Detail from Giambattista Nolli's 1748 map of Rome

However, reading the city in terms of the spatial and temporal continuities of landscape is not a recent innovation. Perhaps the most famous figure-ground diagram is found on Giambattista Nolli's 1748 map of Rome (fig. 3), which shows the city in intricate detail. Notably, Nolli departed from the more conventional graphical representations (still used by Sitte more than a century later) by representing *all* public space – internal as well as external – as the unified ground against which he places the figure of private space. Consequently, the distinction between inside and outside is blurred, highlighting the continuity of the public realm. This is highly significant in the context of conservation, since it speaks powerfully to the continuity of buildings and city, revealing the inadequacy of focusing on particular objects in isolation.

This concern with the continuity of public space is a key aspect in the HUL framework: “The historic urban landscape approach sees and interprets the city as a continuum in time and space” (UNESCO 2013, 9; cf. also UNESCO 2016, 28). It is interesting to note that the *Vienna Memorandum*, which laid the foundation for the 2011 *Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape*, includes open space within its definition of contemporary architecture (UNESCO 2005, art. 9). Commenting on the influential planner and architectural critic Werner Hegemann, Bandarin and van Oers specifically refer to figure and ground:

The relationships between mass and void constitute, according to Hegemann, the elements of continuity of a city, in a harmonious process of development. He sees the city as a continuous and incremental collage, where all the parts, while maintaining their identity, interact to create a new spatial meaning. From this derives the importance of the historic city as the physical outcome of the long-term process and the “manifesto” for its development. (Bandarin & van Oers 2012, 12)

The metaphor of collage aptly describes the hybrid nature of historic cities developed in the process of interventions made by successive generations, each one having specific needs and

ideas. This does not amount to architectural traditionalism, as is sometimes assumed, but rather asserts the relevance of context for contemporary creativity. It is not concerned with stylistic continuity but with sustaining the creativity of tradition.

The above metaphor of collage dates back at least to the 1970s, when the failures of modernist urbanism were becoming increasingly evident, most obviously in Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter's seminal book *Collage City* ([1978] 1993). Strongly critical of modernist urbanism, they speak of a "solid-void dialectic" and a "crisis of the object," suggesting that "it might be judicious, in most cases, to allow and encourage the object to become digested in a prevalent texture or matrix" (Rowe & Koetter [1978] 1993, 83). Indeed, they frame their discussion as an appeal "for the joint existence of [...] the private and the public, of innovation and tradition, of both the retrospective and the prophetic gesture" ([1978] 1993, 8). The relation of figure and ground can thus be seen as critical to the shaping of competing urbanisms, and thus also to the conservation of historic public spaces.



Fig. 4. Piazza delle Erbe, Verona

3. The Townscape Campaign

The decade following the Second World War set the conditions to which Rowe, Koetter and others were later to react, ultimately leading to the development of the HUL approach. If the pre-war period laid the foundations for modernist urbanism – for example in the *Athens Charter* by Le Corbusier and the Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) of 1933 (Le Corbusier [1941] 1973) as well as his *Radiant City* (Le Corbusier [1935] 1967) – it was the post-war era that saw its triumph.

“Townscape” was a campaign initiated by *The Architectural Review* (AR), Britain’s foremost architectural magazine, as a direct challenge to the emerging CIAM school of modernist planning. The December 1949 edition which launched Townscape included an extended article under the same title by the editor, Hubert de Cronin Hastings (under the pseudonym Ivor de Wolfe), and a “Townscape Casebook” by Gordon Cullen. Thereafter, Townscape became a regular column, accompanied by Cullen’s signature illustrations, key to which was a form of visual presentation known as “serial vision.” As Mira Engler (2015, 16) notes, this did much to free the representation of urban design from the constraints of the highly static focus of the nineteenth-century Beaux-Arts tradition. Cullen’s material was subsequently published in book form (Cullen 1961).

The Townscape campaign’s principal focus lay in identifying and strengthening the culture of a place and its people – that is, with cultural continuity (Erten 2015). To take just one example, Cullen’s section entitled “The Line of Life” (Cullen 1961, 111–119) uses an analysis of Brixham and other seaside towns to suggest that the physical expression of the “lines of force” which arise from the place’s origins and functions are what gives it intelligibility, structure, and character. Townscape’s subsequent characterisation as a formalist school of urban design – Rowe and Koetter ([1978] 1993, 33) label it “a cult of English villages, Italian hill towns and North African casbahs” – is a misreading, perhaps partly rooted in the fact that Cullen’s work is chiefly known through *The Concise Townscape* (Cullen 1971), a later edition comprising just two of the four sections from the original book, and omitting the great majority of modern architectural imagery.

Hastings rooted the Townscape campaign in the English picturesque tradition (de Wolfe 1949, 355), building on research by another AR employee, the emigré architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner, into the picturesque and *genius loci*. For Pevsner, the picturesque provided the means to argue for a specifically English contribution to European art, a consistent theme from his early career in Germany to his book *The Englishness of English Art* (Pevsner 1956) and beyond. It also enabled him to distinguish between modernism in architecture and modernism in town planning, as well as to argue for the former while avoiding the pitfalls of the latter. More broadly, the picturesque enabled to shift focus from the individual object to the effect of the whole, providing a means of combining the disparate and ordinary into something of coherence and delight, something more than the sum of its parts. It also provided the justification to re-establish the relevance of appearance in urban design, and to look beyond fine buildings of individual note – conventional objects of art historical study – to develop heritage as a landscape, including the vernacular and everyday alongside architectural

gems. In the context of the current discussion, the move from the individual monument to the contextual landscape rebalances the relation of figure and ground.

I have reflected elsewhere on the interrelation of the Townscape movement and conservation, including the campaign's role in saving the Covent Garden area of London from redevelopment in the early 1970s (Walter 2017, 66). Interestingly, Ken Taylor makes an explicit link between HUL and Cullen, suggesting that Cullen's concern for how people experience urban space was foundational for the subsequent development of HUL thinking, in contrast to conventional conservation's more limited focus on historic monuments (Taylor 2015, 180). Once again, we see the relation of figure and ground in play, as we do when noting Cullen's attunement to the relation between public and private, and the potential spatial continuity between inside and outside. For example, he refers to the Greenwich market with its "complex interlocking of volumes in which the quality of light and materials denies the concept of outside and inside" (Cullen 1961, 184–185).

4. Implications for conservation

The HUL approach treats the city as a form of landscape: a spatial and temporal continuum. The significance of this lies in the implicit acknowledgment of the physical and temporal layeredness of built heritage, and the acceptance of change. This closing section briefly considers the implications of this position for conservation as a whole.

As discussed above, the Nolli map of Rome is significant in representing all public space, both external and internal, as a single continuum, or a landscape. To refuse to distinguish the interior of a public building from the space of the street or square outside is to challenge and render artificial the distinction between buildings and cities. This has profound implications for the way individual buildings are understood and approached in conservation.

The development of the HUL Recommendation by UNESCO overlapped with the debate in ICOMOS over the New Heritage Paradigm under the presidency of Gustavo Araoz (2008–2016). The historic environment's "tolerance for change" was a central theme of Araoz's paper delivered before the ICOMOS Advisory Committee in Valletta in October 2009. The presentation included discussion of historic urban areas,

[...] where values have also expanded from being assumed to rest entirely in its urban fabric and its building morphologies toward the dynamic nature of the city and its inherent role in providing a vibrant setting for communal life *and an incubator for creativity*. In other words, an important cultural value of the historic city rests precisely upon its *ability to be in a constant* evolution, where forms, *space and uses* are always adapting to replace obsolescence with functionality. *This gives rise to the paradox – or perhaps the oxymoron – of the concept of preserving the ability to change.* (Araoz 2011, 58; emphasis added)

Passages in italics are additions in the 2011 version of the paper, as compared with the 2009 original, demonstrating increasing clarity about the living nature of cities and the acceptance of change.

Modernist urbanism, by contrast, would typically attempt to isolate the surviving historic city as a museum piece, even to the point of moving awkwardly located historic buildings to form a new

historic zone, as in the case of Spon Street in Coventry (Walter 2017, 59). This had the effect of pitting history against development – precisely the failing that HUL seeks to address. From the HUL perspective, preservation is a slow form of destruction, and change is not only inevitable but desirable as proof of ongoing life. With few exceptions, it is only those historic cities that are allowed to change that will remain well used and thus survive in the long term. Lack of a firm distinction between buildings and cities alluded to above suggests that buildings are not different in principle. In its acceptance of change and emphasis on continuity, HUL can be seen as close to the “living buildings” approach in conservation. Once it is accepted that artefacts, buildings and cities cannot be locked in watertight categories, but rather exist on a continuum, then the HUL approach gains wider relevance, the applicability of its insights flowing down the scale to individual buildings and perhaps even beyond. Rather than being applicable only to historic cities and public spaces, HUL becomes a resource for all areas of conservation theory. In this context, the lack of acknowledgement of HUL in official Historic England publications suggests that official conservation bodies still struggle with the legitimacy of change in historic environments.

HUL shows that change itself should not be resisted as modern conservation has assumed from its inception. Change is important and should be anticipated and celebrated, not as an end in itself but as evidence that historic cities (and, by extension, buildings) continue to live. Naturally, not all change is good; elsewhere I have attempted to sketch out a narrative approach to conservation that can provide the foundation for differentiating destructive changes from ones that preserve (and even enhance) the character and identity of a place (Walter 2020a). *In nuce*, constructive change in the historic environment depends on familiarity with the narrative to date, and on being able to extend that narrative within its constraints, without sacrificing local character or identity. In this regard, it is encouraging to note how the Historic England appraisal process discussed in the first section places considerable stress on understanding how the city developed – that is, its story to date – and the role of narrative in its articulation.

Conclusion

This article has brought together a selection of documents from Historic England, the shifting relationship of figure and ground, and the post-war Townscape campaign, noting their links to arguments concerning modernist urbanism and the development of HUL. Historic England’s guidance shows some engagement with the notion of urban landscape and includes many of the constituent concerns of the HUL approach, but fails to acknowledge that relationship or follow the argument through with consistency. Similarly, the Townscape movement, which has been highly influential in post-war Britain as well as responsible for the more humane examples of public space in that era, is not a resource that Historic England’s guidance seems to regard as relevant.

To see the city as a form of landscape has profound implications for the understanding of continuity and change across all areas of conservation. The HUL approach is rooted in the recognition of the harm that an imposed preservationist stasis can cause to historic urban space. The same is true of historic buildings. The issue, therefore, is not to prevent change, but to allow the historic environment, at whatever scale, to change well. The time is ripe for the hard-won lessons of HUL to be applied to conservation as a whole.

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