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IHBC GUIDANCE NOTES

Townscape as an important concept in conservation area management

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This is one of a series of occasional IHBC Guidance Notes published by the Institute of Historic Building Conservation (IHBC). IHBC Guidance Notes offer advice on topics that we consider crucial to the promotion of good built and historic environment conservation policy and practice.

The IHBC welcomes feedback, comment and updates on our Guidance Notes to our consultant editor Bob Kindred, at research@ihbc.org.uk

Executive Summary

1. This short guidance note is intended to explain the importance that the Institute places on townscape as a specific concept in the proper management of conservation areas.

The early recognition of 'Townscape'

2. Considerations of townscape in heritage planning have a long history going back at least as far as the writings of Ian Nairn in *The Architectural Review* in the 1950s that were to become his two influential books '*Outrage*' (1955) [1] and '*Counter Attack – against subtopia*' (1956) with perceptive illustrations by Gordon Cullen.

3. Cullen's seminal book '*Townscape*' first published in 1961 was based on many of the concepts honed by the articles in *The Architectural Review* and further elaborated on by him until the late 1980s. '*The Concise Townscape*' [2] has subsequently been republished around 15 times, proving to be one of the most enduring, important and influential books on urban design in the 20th century.

4. Cullen's book instantly established itself as a major influence on heritage specialists and urban designers as well as architects and planners concerned with what towns and cities look like. It is required reading for fledgling professionals working in building conservation. *'Townscape'* remains as significant and directly relevant to urban heritage management day as when it was published over half a century ago. As its introduction made clear, townscape explores the fact that certain visual effects in the grouping of buildings were based on quite definable, if spontaneous, aesthetic principles, that is, what it is that makes a town 'work' architecturally.

5. Also notable and persuasive from the outset was *'The Character of Towns: An Approach to Conservation'* [3] by Roy Workett published by the Architectural Press in 1969 shortly after the first conservation areas were being declared. The book included many of Cullen's townscape sketches [4]. The book was informative and highly influential in helping define the first generation of conservation designations. Many of the principles advanced by Workett then were presented with great clarity. The concepts are equally applicable today and are worth revisiting, not least the 'Townscape Discipline: Identity Areas'.

National policy and guidance

6. Preservation and enhancement of townscape quality was a fundamental objective underpinning the creation of conservation areas in 1967 and enshrined subsequently in England and Wales (and mirrored in Scotland) in Section 72 of the Planning (Listed Buildings & Conservation Areas) Act 1990.

7. It is essential to recognise and understand the central importance of townscape to meet the key statutory duty relating to conservation areas in the 1990 Act and this was further emphasised by Planning Policy Guidance Note 15 [PPG15] published in 1994. It could be said that Cullen's aesthetic principles found expression in the section in the PPG on the assessment and designation of conservation areas, emphasizing that conservation policy should address the quality of townscape in its broadest sense.

8. Although PPG15 was cancelled and replaced by the National Planning Policy Framework [NPPF] in March 2012 [5] the clarity and soundness of those long-standing principles remain entirely valid as set out below.

"It is the quality and interest of areas, rather than that of individual buildings, which should be the prime consideration in identifying conservation areas. There has been increasing recognition in recent years

that our experience of a historic area depends on much more than the quality of individual buildings - on the historic layout of property boundaries and thoroughfares; on a particular 'mix' of uses; on characteristic materials; on appropriate scaling and detailing of contemporary buildings; on the quality of advertisements, shop fronts, street furniture and hard and soft surfaces; on vistas along streets and between buildings; and on the extent to which traffic intrudes and limits pedestrian use of spaces between buildings. Conservation area designation should be seen as the means of recognising the importance of all these factors and of ensuring that conservation policy addresses the quality of townscape in its broadest sense as well as the protection of individual buildings." [6]

8. In Scotland the very first paragraph of the Introduction to NPPG 18 Planning and the Historic Environment published in April 1999 [7] emphasised that the historic environment comprises the tangible built heritage a crucially important part of which is townscapes. [8]

9. Also worth noting is the specific importance Historic Scotland attaches to townscape audits in Planning Advice Note PAN 71: Conservation Area Management. [9]

10. In Wales, Planning Policy Wales Edition 9 issued November 2016, acknowledges townscapes as an element of the historic environment. Paragraph 6.1.2 states:

"The historic environment of Wales is made up of individual historic features, archaeological sites, historic buildings and historic parks, gardens, townscapes and landscapes, collectively known as historic assets."

National guidance in England today

11. It is considered that the revised guidance '*Understanding Place – Historic Area Assessments*' [10] published in 2017 by Historic England (developed from text first published by English Heritage in 2010) gives insufficient weight to the specific significance of townscape as a part of conservation area management, preferring instead the less specific term 'place'. Furthermore, no satisfactory definition of 'historic areas' is provided. The associated document '*Conservation Area Designation, Appraisal and Management*' [11] also mentions 'townscape' only occasionally.

12. Paragraph 1.2.2 of Historic England's document states that:

"The principle focus of an HAA is generally on the historic built environment. It will typically give insights into how and why a place has come to look the way it does; into the relationships of buildings to open spaces, street patterns and boundaries; views in and out of confined spaces; building

scale, type, materials, current use, and other related factors. It should also illuminate an area's character, which can be derived from a subtle mixture of different elements, including characteristics that are shared with other places and aspects that are particular to that place."

13. Paragraph 2.2.3 goes on to state that:

"Visual attributes are supplemented or modified by a range of other factors derived from movement, activity and the senses, including traffic (and traffic noise), the changing views opened up by moving through a landscape, and daily and seasonal variations. These aspects of the townscape can have a profound influence on the way we experience and value places. They are all subject to change over time, so it may be necessary to identify key stages in an area's development and define its character at each stage."

14. Based on established policy cited above, the Institute considers that townscape is a fundamental consideration in relation to the architectural quality of historic areas, not a minor experience to be placed alongside matters such as traffic noise, and that there are sound reasons in planning and policy for recognising and registering distinctions between 'place' and 'townscape'.

15. The Institute's view is therefore that heritage policy interpretations that do not register the values and roles of townscape necessarily significantly under-value the principles that underpin the appreciation, evaluation and description of historic settlements and urban areas more generally. IHBC believes that the concept of townscape deserves specific recognition and definition and crucially to act as a prompt for conservation specialists and other built environment professional to apply this to, for example, historic area assessment and urban characterisation studies when this aspect might otherwise be overlooked.

16. The IHBC notes that elsewhere, Historic England does recognise the concept of townscape but not in the context of advice to local planning authorities. Its web page advice is that:

"There are a number of approaches available for identifying and interpreting the historic dimension of present day landscapes or townscapes. [our emphasis] They can be used singly or in combination, depending on the purpose, scope, and scale of a project." [\[12\]](#)

17. With regard to conservation area designation and management Historic England notes:

"townscape analysis: for example, spatial issues such as important views into and out of the conservation area, landmarks, and open or green

spaces; or temporal issues, including pre-urban landscape features (such as the lines of former field boundaries) which survive in the current townscape" (...) "designated and undesignated heritage assets, including buildings of townscape merit and unlisted buildings or groups of buildings that contribute positively to the character or appearance of the area"

Also, 'The Definition (or Summary) of Special Interest' goes on to say:

"key elements of the special interest are likely to be designated and other heritage assets, their intrinsic importance and the contribution they make to townscape" [our emphasis]. [\[13\]](#)

Conclusion

18. The surprising omission of the term 'townscape' from the National Planning Policy Framework Section 12, '*Conserving and enhancing the historic environment*', makes it, in the Institute's view, all the more important that it the concept should appear explicitly in best practice heritage advice, and not least as it appears elsewhere in Section 7 dealing with good design. Clearly the substitution of the word 'townscape' with 'place' in Section 7 would both undermine and cloud the principle.

19. The IHBC therefore recommends to practitioners that the clearly espoused concepts of townscape, that have specifically evolved over many years from the Gordon Cullen era and before, should be at the forefront of day-to-day understanding, practice and the formation of policy and advice regarding the management of conservation areas.

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Endnotes

1. Originally to have been called 'Outrage in the Name of Public Authority' - Outrage "that the whole land surface is being covered by the creeping mildew that already circumscribes all our towns."
2. 'The Concise Townscape' ISBN 0 85139 586 6 was a republishing of the earlier 'Townscape' but with the case studies omitted.
3. 'The Character of Towns: An Approach to Conservation' ISBN 0 85139 121 4
4. Curiously, Cullen is not credited with the drawings although his style is unmistakable.
5. With the short interregnum occupied by Planning Policy Statement 5 (PPS5)

6. Planning Policy Guidance Note 15 paragraph 4.2
7. <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/1999/04/nppg18>:
8. Alongside historic buildings, parks and gardens, designed landscapes, ancient monuments, archaeological sites and landscapes.
9. <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2004/12/20450/49058>
10. Published April 2017 as v.1.2 by Historic England replacing the English Heritage guidance v.1.0 published in June 2010 and a companion document, Understanding place: Historic Area Assessments in a planning and development context.
11. Historic England Advice Note 1, 2016
12. <https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/planning/understanding-historic-places/>
13. <https://content.historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/conservation-area-designation-appraisal-management-advice-note-1/heag040-conservation-area-designation-appraisal-and-management.pdf/>