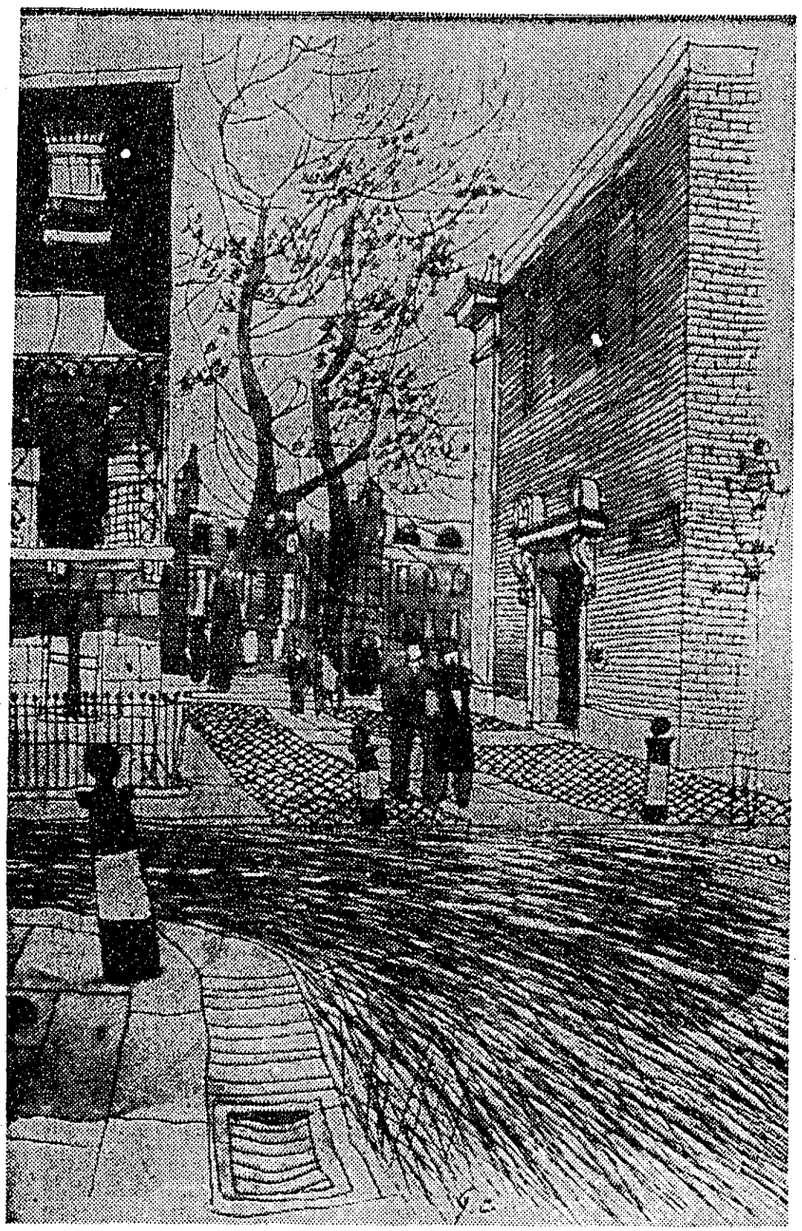
# Real Estate Transaction 1 -- No Title: A Vision, of Cities Revived in ...

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

*New York Times (1923-Current file);* Dec 19, 1971; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. R1



Gordon Cullen

"No one denies the place of swiftly moving traffic in the life of a town. It is the universal spread of traffic, its arrogant seizure of *all* roads, that calls for protest."
*"The Concise Townscape" by Gordon Cullen*

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

# A Vision of Cities Revived in a Book

Townscape is an idea whose time has come—and come, and come. It came 10 years ago, with the publication of a book called "Townscape" by the English architect and urban consultant Gordon Cullen. The book was a landmark exercise in defining those elements of urban design that add up to the art of environment.

Its thesis was that the urban scene is made up of thousands of identifiable relationships of its man-made parts. These relationships account for much of the functional efficiency and emotional response that make a city a good or a bad place to be. It was revelatory vision.

Such vision is given to few in any generation. Sharing the democratic fate of all great ideas, this one was almost universally missed or perverted.

The builders of cities now have another chance. For its tenth anniversary, Townscape has been reissued as "The Concise Townscape," in paperback, by the Van Nostrand Reinhold Company. Mr. Cullen is having a second go at salvation.

He can take credit for an increased awareness in the past decade of the need for conservation and pedestrian areas. He has pinpointed details of urban character and amenity.

But the first time around, he tells us, the dissemination of these principles produced a rash of cobblestones and bollards and other forms of picturesque embellishment, with only a limited grasp of the essentials of town planning.

"The superficials," he says, "have become the currency and the spirit; the Environment Game itself is still locked away in the little red and gilt box."

Townscape is not, he insists, a kind of outdoor decoration. It is not "a style or device for filling up empty spaces with cobbles. It is the art of using raw materials — houses, trees and roads—to create a lively and human scene."

Real townscape is the opposite of what he calls "prairie planning" — the creation of a dull, desolate wilderness, a collection of uninteresting, unvaried buildings and streets straightlined by lifeless and sanitized planning into a terrifying infinity of visual and psychological ennui. It is a concentration of a great variety of activity and form.

In Cullen's definition, one building is architecture, but two buildings are townscape. As soon as two buildings are juxtaposed, the art of townscape, or the art of environment, is released.

In Cullen's definition, one building is architecture but two buildings are townscape. As soon as two buildings are juxtaposed, the art of townscape, or the art of environment, is released.

The relationships and the spaces between the buildings, what they do and how they look, the kind of experiences they give the pedestrian or inhabitant, become as important as the buildings themselves. No structure really exists in isolation. Each is immediately affected, changed, transformed, for better or worse, through use and appearance, by the others.

Multiply all this to the size of a town, and you have the art of environment. As town grows to city, "the possibilities of relationships increase, maneuvers and ploys proliferate."

The lessons of townscape are taught in older cities everywhere. The way through a narrow, medieval Italian passage to an elegant baroque square is a procession of environmental incidents rich in the historic and human interplay that makes a city a rewarding place.

A winding English village street may play country against town, offer rusticity and urbanity through the placement and scale of buildings and spaces and the juxtaposition of the natural and the man-made elements.

The book is really a primer — a brave, intelligent effort to teach visual sensitivity to those who neither look nor see. That, alas, includes planners and architects.

What should we look for? Details and texture of the ground (floorscape), of walls (wallscape), and the way they may combine for vistas or enclosures, secluded walkways or open thoroughfares, barriers or invitations, suggesting welcome or rejection, activity or repose, intimacy or grandeur.

There are hazards, such as railings, and enticements, such as the suggestion of surprise around a corner, or a gate or archway to go through. There are contrasts, in variety and intricacy of surface through projection and recession, and changes, in levels or from narrow to wide and dark to light.

All this is experienced by "serial vision," revelations in sequence, that bring a plan, and place, to life.

The product is a set of satisfying sensory messages and a rich complexity of urban experience. The result is urban character — a recognizable sense of place—and amenity, which gives pleasure and convenience.

These desirable effects may be enhanced or destroyed through lighting and signs, new construction or changes in use. The urban fabric is fragile.

A square can be sabotaged, as Copley Plaza in Boston was, to take an American example, by demolishing a few buildings around it for parking lots so that the enclosed space "leaks out."

New York destroyed not only history but a dramatic urbanism of contrast, pedestrian scale, intimacy, color and surprise when it wiped out the old

*Continued on Page 2, Col. 7*

# A Vision of Cities Revived in Book

*Continued from Page 1*

narrow streets downtown that led to the mystery and closure of the solid stone arches of the approach to Brooklyn Bridge. The replacement, an open superblock of high-rise structures, is a lesson in everything that proper townscape is not, and should not be.

"Prairie planning" can be seen in the Bronx in the widely spaced, identically scaled bulk housing of Bruckner Boulevard, innocent of humanizing detail or incident.

But for the observant, New York also offers excellent townscape lessons.

"Closure," or in its complete form, the "closed vista," is illustrated by Trinity Church at the head of Wall Street, a sooty Gothic spire that effectively climaxes and cuts off the skyscraper canyon. It is a memorable urban passage.

"Incident," or punctuation," could be St. Paul's colonnaded portico interrupting the modern commercial flow of Broadway. "Silhouette" was the Grand Central Building at the end of Park Avenue before the Pan Am Building blotted it out.

"Immediacy" may be found along the river edges in Lower Manhattan, where rotting piers make no real barriers between water and concrete.

"Foils" are Central Park's surrounding skyscrapers, walling its pastoral greenery with an environmental drama that is succinctly New York.

"The city is not just a display of individual works of architecture like pictures in a gallery," says Cullen, "it is an environment for the complete human being, who can claim it either statically or in movement. He demands more than a picture gallery; he demands the drama that can be released all around him from floor, sky, buildings, trees and levels by the art of arrangement."

"As soon as the dialogue is understood, the whole place begins to shake hands with you." Call it urban design or the esthetics of the environment, it is the oldest urban art.