

GORDON CULLEN IN VALENCIA: FOUR URBAN LANDSCAPES

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ABSTRACT

The Concise Townscape, by Gordon Cullen, was initially published in English in 1971, and it is a key work in urban design. The Spanish edition was published some years later, in 1974, with the title *El paisaje urbano. Tratado de estética urbanística*.

Gordon Cullen introduced in *The Concise Townscape* different concepts to describe the visual experience of townscape, showing through drawing and photographs how urban environments could be experienced as a pictorial and temporal sequence.

In this communication, we will analyze the presence in *The Concise Townscape* of four images of urban landscapes of Valencia, which Gordon Cullen used to illustrate different concepts of visual and spatial perception related to urban design. The images show the *Plaza de la Virgen* with its textile roof, a stone sculpture of the *Puente del Real*, the shop frontage of the *Platería del Sol*, and the facade of the *Lonja* with a tree located in front of it. We will examine, first of all, the relationship between these urban landscapes and the four urban design concepts associated with them in *The Concise Townscape*: "the outdoor room and enclosure", "looking into the enclosure", "handsome gesture" and "trees incorporated". We will add a comparative analysis of the current situation and the changes these urban landscapes have undergone since the moment Cullen took the photographs for his book.

KEYWORDS

Gordon Cullen; Valencia; townscape; urban landscape; urban design.

1. INTRODUCTION

Gordon Cullen (1914-1994) may be considered one of the best architectural drafters of the last century. In 1961 he published *Townscape*, an essential work in the field of urban design, where he synthesized with an excellent graphic quality many of the ideas presented jointly with Cronin Hastings in *The Architectural Review* in the fifties. As of 1971, the book was published in an abbreviated version, entitled *The Concise Townscape*, whose Spanish edition was published some years later, in 1974, with the title *El paisaje urbano. Tratado de estética urbanística*. In the introduction of this book, Cullen proposed one of the most straightforward definitions of urban design: "One building standing alone in the countryside is experienced as a work of architecture, but bring half a dozen buildings together and an art other than architecture is made possible" (Cullen, 1971:7). For Cullen, that art, which we call urban design, is an art of relationship. To show these relationships, *The Concise Townscape* introduces different concepts to describe the visual experience of townscape, showing through drawing and photographs how to experience urban environments as a pictorial and temporal sequence.

2. IMAGES OF URBAN LANDSCAPES OF VALENCIA IN *THE CONCISE TOWNSCAPE*

In this communication, we will analyze the presence in *The Concise Townscape* of four images of urban landscapes of Valencia, which Gordon Cullen used to illustrate different concepts of visual and spatial perception related to urban design. Those four images, in order of appearance in the book, correspond to *Plaza de la Virgen* (Virgin Square) and its textile roof, an edicule of the *Puente del Real* (Royal Bridge), the shopfront of the *Plateria del Sol* (Sun Silversmith) and the facade of the *Lonja de la Seda* (Silk Exchange Hall). All of them are photographs, accompanied by drawings only in one case, that of the image of the *Lonja*.

2.1. The *Plaza de la Virgen* and its textile canopy: the outdoor room and enclosure

The first image of Valencia in *The Concise Townscape* is a view from the *Plaza de la Virgen* (Virgin Square), with its extended textile canopy. This image appears in the lower half

of page 29, dedicated to the theme of "the outdoor room and enclosure". The book refers to the two upper images on that page as two entrances to the same square at Bourdeaux, but it does not identify the city's location where the square of the lower image belongs. The squares are used here as examples of enclosure of the outdoor room, which, for Cullen, is perhaps "the most powerful, the most obvious, of all the devices to instill this sense of position, of identity with the surroundings" (Cullen, 1971: 29). This type of space embodies the idea of "Hereness", an idea that Cullen will develop throughout the book.

The person's sense of position is his unspoken reaction to the environment, which, according to Cullen, might be expressed as

"...I am in IT or above IT or below IT, I am outside IT, I am enclosed or I am exposed. These sensations are basically interlocked with human behavior and their morbid expression is demonstrated in claustrophobia and agoraphobia (Cullen, 1971:29)."



Figure 1. The Plaza de la Virgen and its textile canopy, Valencia. a) Image that appears in *The Concise Landscape* (Cullen, 1971). b) Current state (Photographic archive of the author, 2002)

Concerning the Virgin Square and its textile canopy, Cullen states it is "a near-perfect example of the outdoor room with three-dimensional wallpaper" (Cullen, 1971:29). We can consider that much of that perfection is due to the singular canopy: providing a roof contributes significantly to completing the spatial envelope of the square that results from the facades of the surrounding buildings and the plane ground.

The canopy that we can see in Cullen's book, of 1,200 square meters, is the one that was built in the 60s to cover the *Plaza de la Virgen* for certain special events such as the Offering of flowers (in the feast of *Fallas*) or during the feast of Corpus Christi. The textile canopy, therefore, was not a permanent covering element. Its author was the Valencian Ricardo Cánoves Marcía, known as "El Pernalés", who, although without any formal training in engineering, was a recognized specialist in complex works involving the handling and transporting of heavy elements.

The canopy of Cánoves of the 60s, although it resisted half a century, was already significantly deteriorated when, in 2011, its complete renovation was proposed. New porous textile material was then used to replace the old canvas, and modern anchoring techniques for fastening cables to the facades to avoid damage.

In recent years, however, it has not been possible to extend the textile canopy due to the refusal of the neighbors of the building located in the opposite part of the Virgin's Basilica to authorize new anchors fastening to the facade. It is hoped that this difficulty can be overcome soon to recover the "near-perfect example of the outdoor room" Cullen pointed out in his book.

2.2. The edicule of the *Puente del Real*: looking into enclosure

The second image of Valencia that appears in Cullen's book corresponds to a carved stone edicule of the *Puente del Real* (Royal Bridge).

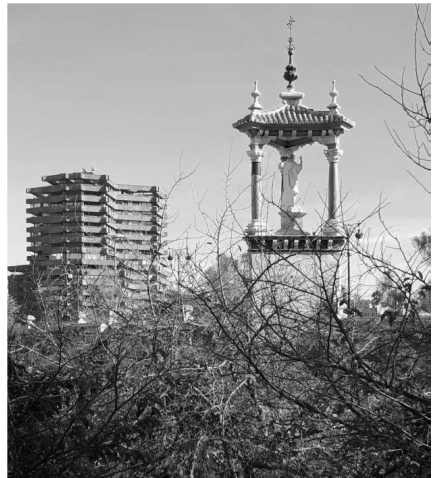


Figure 2. Stone edicule of the *Puente del Real*, Valencia. a) Image that appears in *The Concise Landscape* (Cullen, 1971). b) Current state (Photographic archive of the author, 2019)

It is shown in the lower half of page 36, in the section entitled "looking into enclosure", and is the only one of the four images taken in Valencia in which the name of the city is expressly mentioned (Fig. 2.a).

Cullen saw great potential to stimulate the imagination in this edicule that protects a sculpture with a tile roof resting on three columns:

"Anything that may be occupied either by oneself or by one's imagination, which here lifts us into a carved stone edicle in Valencia, becomes to that extent of interest a warm colour in the greys of the inhospitable (Cullen, 1971: 36)"

The edicule that captured Cullen's attention is one of the two *casilicios* existing on the *Puente del Real*, one on each side of the bridge. The *casilicios* were characteristic constructions of the Italian baroque, whose purpose was to cover a religious image located outdoors. The images of the *Puente del Real* represent San Vicente Mártir and San Vicente Ferrer, and this second one is the one that appears specifically in *The Concise Townscape*. The sculpture that Cullen photographed is the current one, one of the replicas made in 1936 to replace the originals, sculpted in 1602 by Vicente Leonart Esteve, and placed a year later. The original sculptures had no cover until 1683, when the *casilicios* to protect them were erected, paid for by the archbishop of Valencia Juan Tomás de Rocaberti. The *casilicios* of the *Puente del Real* are triangular in the plan because they are built on the bridge's cutwaters. They are composed of a three-sided roof of glazed tiles, supported by three columns with a shaft of Alcublas black stone, a material that has come out to light after a recent restoration in 2016.

Because of its architectural configuration, the *casilicio* of the *Puente del Real* is considered by Cullen as an urban landscape element, similar to others such as porticos, balconies, and terraces. All of them allow creating exterior spaces framed by architectural elements

that, thanks to their transparency, can "draw us outwards" (Cullen, 1971:36).

In the image of Cullen, we can see on the left, behind the bridge, the silhouette of the disappeared Ripalda Palace, designed by the architect Joaquín Arnau, a remarkable example of the Valencian eclectic architecture from the end of the 19th century, which was demolished in 1967-1968 to expand the Exhibition Fair that occupied the adjacent plots. The Fair, however, moved shortly after that to its current location, outside the city, and, on the site of the Ripalda Palace, the housing tower known as *La Pagoda*, designed by the architects Escario, Vidal, and Vives, was built.

Cullen's photograph is taken from the right parapet of the Turia River, looking north. A current image of the stone edicule taken from the same point of view shows us in the background a very different urban skyline, due to the massive volume of *La Pagoda*. The foreground is also very different today when we look at it from the river parapet. The *Puente del Real* and its arches are hidden by the already grown vegetation of the Turia Gardens, a large urban park built in the old riverbed in the eighties, on whose plant mass the stone edicule still emerges (Fig. 2.b).

2.3. The shopfront of the *Platería del Sol*: a handsome gesture

The third image of Valencia, which appears on page 42 of *The Concise Townscape*, belongs to an urban element that unfortunately no longer exists today: the shopfront of the *Platería del Sol* (Sun Silversmith). Cullen uses this example to illustrate a design concept that he calls "handsome gesture":

"Considering that so much of urban landscape consists of the quiet street, the simple backwater, the humdrum and ordinary, it is perhaps useful to utilize to the full what local talent there is, as this modest little scene shows. A fine display of, I hope, gilt lettering, to illuminate the narrow street (Cullen, 1971:42)"



Figure 3. Shop front of the *Plateria del Sol*, Valencia. a) Image that appears in *The Concise Landscape* (Cullen, 1971). b) Current state (Photographic archive of the author, 2019)

The narrow street to which Cullen refers is the street of Martín Mengod, which starts perpendicular to the Market Square and ends up facing down with the facade where the *Plateria del Sol* was once. The signs of its shopfront would never, of course, be authorized today by a heritage commission. However, for Cullen, these signs were a valuable resource to enhance the perspective end of a secondary street, using elements of popular architecture to set up a modest urban scene, unpretentious of monumentality but bright and attractive (Fig. 3.a).

In the place occupied by the shopfront of the *Plateria del Sol* with its golden lettering on a black background, we can see today a newly constructed facade of a public building, preserving the proportion of the windows of the original facade and the arrangement of the balconies. However, this new facade, neutral and correct, no longer can "illuminate a narrow street" (Fig. 3.b).

2.4. The *Lonja de la Seda* facade: trees incorporated to the gothic tracery

The fourth and final image of an urban landscape of Valencia that appears in Cullen's book corresponds to the *Lonja de la Seda* (Silk Exchange Hall). This magnificent 15th-century building is considered one of the world's most relevant civil gothic buildings and has been declared a World Heritage site by UNESCO. At the bottom of page 82, a photograph shows a fragment of the main facade of the building, adjacent to the Market Square: the flared front door of the *Lonja*, with a slightly pointed arch, and one of the large tracery ogival windows that flank it (Fig. 4.a).

This image, along with others, is used to illustrate the "trees incorporated" section, in which Cullen states that the tree is undoubtedly the most ubiquitous of all the natural aids to townscape, and the relationship between trees and towns has a long and honorable history. In this relationship, the focus has moved from a conception of trees as formal structures to a more recent one in which the

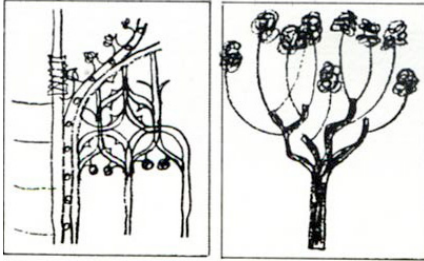
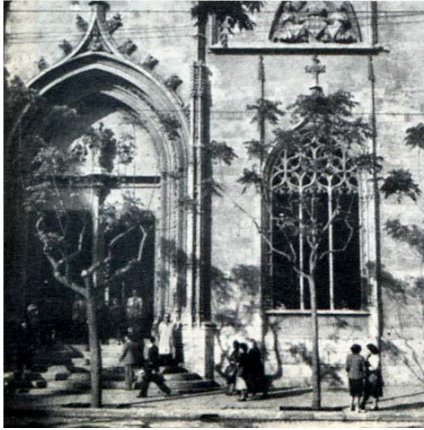


Figure 4. The trees and the gothic facade of the Lonja de la Seda, Valencia. a) Images that appear in *The Concise Landscape* (Cullen, 1971). b) Current state (Photographic archive of the author, 2019)

tree "is more usually accepted in its own right as a living organism which is pleased to dwell among us" (Cullen, 1971: 82). Only from this perspective is it possible, according to Cullen, to establish new relationships between our own organic architecture and the natural structure.

The photograph of the façade of the *Lonja* is accompanied in *The Concise Townscape* by two drawings, representing what caught Cullen's attention: the formal resemblance between the gothic tracery of the ogival window of the *Lonja* and the branches of the cinnamon trees (*Melia azedarach*) in front of the facade.

"The parallel of foliage and tracery in this Spanish scene, below, produces a momentary and transient synchronization which asserts a community of interest beyond the normal and is to that extent remarkable. There is a whole field of study of the textures and habits of growth of trees which can be exploited (Cullen, 1971:82)."

Although Cullen does not point it out, in addition to the synchronization between the tree branches and the gothic ogival traceries, we can affirm that there is an added tuning, which underlines and reinforces the previous one and is clearly visible both in the photograph

of the book and in the one corresponding to the current state: it is the tuning between the tracery and the shadows that the branches of the cinnamon trees project on the facade of the building.

In the photograph of *The Concise Townscape* the cinnamon trees are still young, with a reduced size. Today we can see in front of the Lonja main facade the same trees, already grown, with branches that have acquired a size comparable to that of the gothic tracery of the large windows. However, the asymmetric pruning shows low sensitivity for the structure of branched forms typical of this particular tree type, making difficult the synchronization pointed out by Cullen between foliage and tracery, tree and architecture (Fig. 4.b).

3. CONCLUSIONS

In this communication, we have examined first the relationship between four urban landscapes of Valencia included in *The Concise Townscape* and the four urban design concepts with which they are associated in the book: "outdoor room and enclosure", "looking into the enclosure", "handsome gesture" and "trees incorporated". We have added a comparative analysis of the current situation and the changes these urban landscapes have undergone since Cullen took the photographs for his book.

The simultaneous consideration of the two examined parameters -design concepts and changes undergone over time- allows us to identify four different types of transformation of the analyzed urban landscapes, which are those indicated below:

a) Preservation of the spatial design concept set out in Cullen's book, with the material transformation of some of its elements. It is the case of the *Plaza de la Virgen* textile canopy, which has been renewed in terms of materials but maintains its visual role as a ceiling of the outer room.

b) Preservation of the spatial design concept, although with substantial changes in the context. It is the case of the *Puente del Real* edicule, whose intrinsic visual values still exist, although framed now in a very different environment, both in the foreground and the background.

c) Disappearance of the spatial design concept due to the absence of the element that represented it. It is the case of the showfront of the *Platería del Sol*, erased from the urban landscape of Valencia.

d) Preservation of the spatial design concept with minor distortions in some design elements. It is the case of the *Lonja*, where the forms of the gothic tracery remain immutable over time, as it is foreseeable, because they are stone-built, while the trees in front of its facade grow as living beings, and suffer due to pruning some modification in the shape of its branch structure, affecting its harmony with architecture.

As we can see, only the complete disappearance of the element makes the design concept associated with it cease to be present in an urban landscape. In the other three cases, the spatial design concept expressed by Cullen is still present in today's urban landscape, even if there have been changes to a greater or lesser extent in the components or the environment.

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