



Townscape as Piecemeal Urban Transformation: Piecemeal Transformation as Natural Growth

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The birth of townscape as a post-war urban design idiom might seem accidental when one overlooks the historical background that frames townscape's conceptualization during and after the Second World War. Ideological optimism yielded to technocratic efficiency and modernist planning became mainstream as CIAM's institutional power gradually increased, while resistance to wholesale urban renewal grew.

Against the urbanist and deurbanist utopias put forward by pioneering modernist architects such as Le Corbusier's Ville Radieuse and Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City, or those of the Russian planners such as Milyutin and Okhitovich, Townscape advocated a piecemeal urban reconstruction strategy, arguably at the level of infill. Highly criticized at the time of its inception due to its nationalist biases and its overt historicist references, Townscape stood against the creation of the city from scratch and its advocates pointed towards the necessity of an urban cultural history that expressed itself in the city's "character." According to the advocates of townscape character it is a result of transformation the emergence of which is only possible with reference to duration and change inscribed on the urban fabric. The conception of character as such is heavily due to the fact that the advocates of Townscape were inspired by the early nineteenth century theoretical debates on the picturesque and the resultant English garden as well as the political atmosphere that surrounded this debate.

At this time the developing field of cultural studies in Britain mainly focused on the transformative capacity of "two traditions of dissent that had failed to converge: English popular resistance and the alternative vision of Romanticism." Reinvesting these two traditions with contemporary meaning and a potential of recovery in order to revitalize British culture was key to the emergence and proliferation of Townscape.

As an inseparable component of H. de C. Hastings's post-war editorial tenure at the Architectural Review and his collaboration with Thomas Sharp, Townscape was key in pushing forward a cultural policy embedded in architectural journalism. It would be an oversimplification to think that Townscape was merely inspired by a contextualist drive for conservation of character in urban environments since the cultural policy that shaped Townscape was heavily inspired by the work and thought of important thinkers of the time, first and foremost by that of T.S. Eliot and those of the early New Left.

This paper will trace the impact of the postwar cultural climate on the emergence of Townscape as a strategy of piecemeal urban transformation and explore how the theoretical debate on the picturesque was reinterpreted in its conceptual making especially with reference to the analogy between piecemeal transformation and natural change.

KEY WORDS: Townscape, cultural continuity, picturesque, character.