Urban Design

Urban Design: Three Types of Continuity, Case Studies

By

John Yarwood

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by John Yarwood

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FOREWORD

RICK HALL

I first met John Yarwood when we were fellow post-graduate students at Sheffield University in the 1970s. We collaborated on an international Study and Ideas competition for the regeneration of central Glasgow. Although we only worked together on this and one other project (much later in Finland), I believe we have always shared a common belief in the importance of sustainable development through recognising and conserving the essential character of a place to inform the best way forward for its future development. This recognition of the importance of historic factors in pointing the way forward in the development process is the continuity that John refers to in this book. John's considerable intellect and indefatigable enthusiasm for urban design has informed his life's work since these early beginnings.

The book brings together John's very diverse work experiences in different parts of the world and considers three different forms of continuity relating to these very different locations. At first sight it is difficult to imagine what the common issues might be in the urban design of such contrasting locations as St. Petersburg, Jamaica and Telford. John employs continuity as his theme to analyse and understand the development process and evolution of urban form in these very different locations.

Urban design involves various forms of intervention in the development process. The considerable challenges posed by the need to reconcile the sometimes conflicting aims of conserving character, promoting enhancement of property values, and generating additional funds to plough back into essential non-profitable development are tackled here head on. John's passionately held view that sustainable development depends on having a mixed land use strategy avoiding large areas of single use zoning; a commitment to prioritised investment in public transport and minimising the impact of road and parking development; and employing a concept of 'hard' and 'soft' elements giving clear structure, but maintaining essential

flexibility in order to be responsive to continually changing developmental needs, can be seen in each of these case studies.

There are many drawings explaining the design proposals for each of these case studies, many of which have been individually drawn by John. His clear analysis of the issues and his articulation of appropriate strategies to address them filters down through conceptual diagrams and master plans to detailed three dimensional built form proposals for landscapes, townscapes and the buildings and spaces they define. This comprehensive approach from general strategies to detailed specific proposals demonstrates a confidence and understanding of the issues which is impressive. Inevitably, to show one's complete hand in this way invites detailed criticism of the specific proposals, and how well they achieve the stated aims, and John doesn't shy away from this.

Design intervention in world cities such as St. Petersburg and Paris, in which conservation is the key issue, contrasts starkly with Jamaica in which highly sensitive cultural and historic identity is of paramount importance. Somewhere in between these examples are the two case-studies of Telford and Thamesmead, both products of the New Town movement in post-war Britain. The other case studies mentioned fit more loosely within these defined types.

Architects and urban designers have a general tendency to prescribe solutions, in the form of concrete proposals, in response to development challenges. The need to have a more open-ended approach with a balance between prescribed built form and more 'loose fit' development, left open to various design interpretation, emerges in some of these case studies.

John introduces the idea of 'persistencies' or 'permanences' into his thinking about the evolution of cities and urban form, continually enabling the designer to refer back to precedents as an indicator of the validity of one's own design. This idea strikes me as central to John's work both in terms of his intellectual approach to problem solving and also in the design vocabulary he employs as an urban designer. The common factors in his approach to developing design proposals for such different locations as we see here manifest themselves at every stage. The importance of the landmark, the street, the axis, the square and other historic elements in urban form; equally the importance of recognising the value of historical, cultural and economic factors in the evolution of development suggest that

there are indeed these ‘Permanences’ that ultimately point the way to how we should intervene.

I recommend this book both as a fascinating revelation of how such diverse locations continue to evolve and adapt to changing circumstances, and also as a real insight into the life’s work of a talented and highly experienced practitioner in the field of urban design.

—Rick Hall
Bradwell, Hope Valley, Derbyshire.
December 2012

PREFACE

This book is about three forms of *continuity* in urban design; in other words, the perpetuation of historic precedents in one way or another. The three forms or types may be called briefly (i) urban conservation; (ii) cultural tourism; and (iii) the persistence of historic form. The book is recounted through 'case studies' of my own work in these fields.

By urban conservation I mean the purposeful protection of the existing key characteristics of a town or district, (as opposed to the fabric of specific buildings of architectural merit and historic interest). One way of achieving this from a practical point of view is to create tourism activity, which I call here 'cultural tourism', from which an income flow can be spun off, as the basis for investment. The third channel is the 'permanence of form', which need not entail existing buildings or urban phenomena on the site (or otherwise available for copy).

The idea of continuity is akin to that of *memory*. It is the opposite of modernism, or revolutionism, if I can call it that, which struck me as implausible—or, after Brutalism had begun to horrify me—as repulsive, even. This book expounds continuity in urban design through my own work as a designer. The study of history strikes me as the heart of the matter.

Most drawings here are my own. They are by others if I mention their names. In chapter 2 several plans are historic examples, namely figs. 2.16 to 2.21; 2.25 to 2.28; 2.36, 2.37, 2.41 and 2.42. In Jamaica (chapter 4) John Harrison did several drawings of St. Ann's estate (figs. 4.5 to 4.7); Oliver Cox did sketches of St. Ann's town, (figs. 4.12 and 4.13), and Ian Robinson made several drawings of industrial archaeological 'reconstructions', (figs. 4.8 to 4.10). Bob Macdonald drew several perspectives of our Telford competition design in chapter 5; (figs. 5.8 and 5.10 to 5.15).

I thought I might describe briefly some of the individuals who had been a vital influence on my work recounted in this book. Certainly I cannot claim all the credit for it, and one has to realise that things are down to a group or network of people and even institutions.

I should first mention two professors at Sheffield university where I studied Planning, namely David Gosling and John ('Jimmy') James. David, as the Professor of Architecture at Sheffield University, was a minor historical figure. He had been Deputy Chief Architect at Runcorn Development Corporation and then Chief Architect at Irvine Development Corporation. Subsequent to a mildly stormy period at Sheffield, he went to Cincinnati University in the USA. He had been a significant figure in the post-war New Towns movement in Britain, and then a substantial figure in university education. When Rick Hall and I went in for a design competition in Glasgow, David was a great moral support and source of encouragement. On many occasions he invited me to be an external critic for his thesis students. Rick Hall and I have worked together on many occasions since then. He subsequently pioneered computer-aided architectural design in David's department before setting up a private company doing the same thing. David was my last connection with the old new towns ethos of the post-war period in Britain. After that, the entire culture of planning and the public sector went into something of a decline, consequent perhaps on the rise of Thatcher-Reaganism.

Jimmy James, the Professor of Urban and Regional Planning, was or is ironically also a reminder of the glory days of English state-sector planning. He was a geographer by background, and rose to become the Chief Planner (and Joint Under-secretary) of the then Ministry of Housing and Local Government—reformed later as the Department of the Environment. He resigned from the civil service over the reform of local government which the new right-wing government was intent on, because he believed strongly in the contrasting recommendations of the Redcliffe Maude Commission (on which he had been the leading light). He was a pragmatist but also a man of rare principle. But what had been a loss to the government became a great gain for Sheffield University. His ineffable elegance and charm of manner swept the opposition of the provincial obscurantists away, and he became the *de facto* vice-chancellor. This saved the university from decline, I suspect. In any event, he was a great support to Rick and me, and we can never forget his devotion to our inadequate work.

When I did a competition entry for Telford Town Centre, for which I won Joint First Prize, (see Chapter 5) I worked with two of David's final-year students of architecture, Bob Macdonald and Dave Lees. Bob executed several of the sketches in this book, and I was greatly impressed by their flair. I particularly recall that I was a follower of brutalism in architecture

and structuralism in planning; for example, the Smithsons and Candilis, Josic and Woods. Working with Bob changed my view, however. I came to appreciate the later work of Leon Krier and that of Gordon Cullen, who were both more interested in urban design than in the architecture of separate buildings. I was taken with the 'new urbanism'. I recall getting to know Gordon in connection with the Telford competition. He worked with another practice that was also a joint first prize winner. We used to go out for a pint in the Dover Castle, behind the old office of Lyons Israel and Ellis in Portland Place where I used to work. Oddly enough, he was also a close friend of David Gosling.

Some time after my work in Bahrain, I was asked to work as a project manager in Jamaica by Donald (Lord) Hankey. See Chapter 4. I worked there with John Harrison, a conservation architect who was a very straight, self-sufficient and simple, modest person who did not have the characteristics of most consultants. He restored beautifully a small barn up a remote hillside in North Wales—not far from me in Shropshire. When not there, he worked for the University of Vienna as an architectural restorer in the remote corners of the Himalayas. He was an inspired architectural sketcher and a fine preparer of measured drawings: several sketches in this book are his[1]. Another reason for recalling my time in Jamaica with fondness was working with Oliver[2] and Jean Cox, who had great experience of the island. Oliver was also a stylish sketcher and several of his works on St. Ann's Bay are included here.[3]

After my time in Mostar (Bosnia), I was asked to go to St. Petersburg (see Chapter 2) by John Kirk, also a senior partner in Gilmore Hankey Kirk (GHK). I was there with Nick Miles, an economist with GHK. In those days, GHK had the excitingly complex flavour of a genuinely multi-disciplinary practice. In other words, civil engineering, architectural and urban design and social science were synthesised. Certainly, Nick was superb thinker about urbanism in all aspects, and not merely an economist. I look back on my time with GHK with great fondness for this reason. In other words, it was a genuine thrill to be in a team of people from diverse backgrounds, all of whom were trying to empathise with each other in an intellectual and cultural sense. In St. Petersburg, during the Boris Yeltsin

[1] See figs. 4.5 to 4.7.

[2] Oliver had set up the firm of architect-planners, Shankland Cox, with Graeme Shankland in the 1960s. All the GHK founding partners had worked for it long before, and that, indeed, was where they had met in the first place.

[3] See figs. 4.12 and 4.13.

era, we worked as a sub-consultant to an enormous American consultancy which was closely allied with certain key Russians. Now years later, GHK has been taken over by another American mega-firm—as has Halcrow, indeed—and so the tsunami of 'cultural/commercial change' rolls ever onward.

Lastly, let me mention Fred Lesche. He was the founder of a small practice in Greifswald, a small town in the former East Germany, in the *land* of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, near the Polish border. I went there for a few visits lasting roughly three months each in order to undertake professional commissions (see Chapter 3 for one case). It was a big help with my German, because in those days in the East few adults could speak English and I had no choice but to try out what I had excelled at whilst at school. Fred and colleagues were immensely friendly, and I lived with him and his family as well as working for him. I found that the Brit, along with the Danes, in those days were quite popular in the East—the Wessis much less so. The Lesche family remained very important to us as the years went by.

—John Yarwood.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Continuity

This book is about three forms of *continuity* in urban design; in other words, the perpetuation of historic precedents in one way or another. The three forms or types may be called briefly (i) urban conservation; (ii) cultural tourism; and (iii) the persistence of historic form. The book is recounted through ‘case studies’ of my own work in these fields.

By urban conservation I mean the purposeful protection of the existing key characteristics of a town or district (as opposed to the fabric of specific buildings of architectural merit and historic interest). One way of achieving this from a practical point of view is to create tourism activity, which I call here ‘cultural tourism’, from which an income flow can be spun off, as the basis for investment. The third channel is the ‘permanence of form’, which need not entail existing buildings or urban phenomena on the site (or otherwise available for copy).

Urban conservation

I draw a distinction between architectural conservation on the one hand and *urban* conservation on the other. The former deals with the conservation of buildings (or building complexes, meaning small areas of closely related buildings). The latter deals with towns or districts within towns, however, and concerns conserving urban *character* even if relatively few actual historic architectural structures were themselves to be involved in preservation action. At the same time it also concerns changing the functionality of the town in such a way as to make it work better.

In chapters two and three I describe several urban conservation strategic plans. The first case is St. Petersburg during the period of Boris Yeltsin. The fundamental ideas of this project were to (a) use public finance (based

on a World Bank loan) in order to restructure the city so as to enhance the potential value of property assets; (b) remove institutional, legal and other 'soft' obstacles to the efficient functioning of the property market; and (c) use private finance to invest in commercially sound property development projects in historic areas which would release profit flows and to redirect these into necessary but non-profitable projects.

The first aim included pedestrianisation schemes, the removal of objectionable traffic congestion and the building of new parking projects, as well as pedestrian canal bridges and similar new linkages. Other examples might be road and infrastructure repair (plus some new links), including sewers, water mains, and so on. This would also entail creating a good functional system for issuing and collecting consumer bills so that costs could be recovered.

The second aim addressed the failure to occupy and use many properties and to collect rents. This failure was very common, and discouraged landlords from spending money to maintain and manage assets, of course. There was not a very good property market, because assets were not always very well documented, and the law was rather rigid. As a result, the idea of a 'market price' had insufficient meaning. There were some legal obstacles to our ideas, such as cross-subsidy by 'packaging', i.e. transferring profits from one investment into another non-profitable project. A lot of creative legal-administrative thinking was needed.

The third aim involved defining (i) suitable commercial-historic investment projects, and (ii) suitable non-commercial cultural-historic projects.

The first and third aims are most relevant to this chapter, and we describe some concrete examples in chapter two below.

In Chapter Three I describe two other urban conservation strategy projects, namely (i) Fleischer Vorstadt, a nineteenth century suburb in the town of Greifswald, on the Baltic sea, north of Berlin, near the Polish border, and (ii) the baroque core of Banska Stiavnica in western Slovakia.

Banska Stiavnica is a small town with a wonderful Baroque heritage, now a "World Heritage Site", but expanded considerably by unfortunate prefabricated concrete housing during the Communist period. The client

was the E.C. and I was employed by the London consultancy GHK,[1] (for whom I had also worked in Jamaica and St. Petersburg—see below). The strategic aim, not unlike that for St. Petersburg, was to strengthen the economy of the area, capture some of the surplus and deploy it to conserve and enrich the environment.

In the case of Fleischer Vorstadt, an area of decaying neo-classical, nineteenth century and turn of the century housing, I was employed by a local architect, Fred Lesche, who was preparing a housing renewal strategy for the housing association Neue Heimat Mecklenberg-Vorpommern. My task was to make a survey and analyse (catalogue) the grammar of the architecture in terms of form and style.

Cultural tourism

In Chapter Four, I describe the cultural tourism conceptual plan for a countryside area near the town of St. Ann's Bay, (on the north coast of Jamaica). The area comprised a Spanish settlement, an African village, an English 'Great House', and an agricultural estate, etc., which were seen as a palimpsest of Jamaican history. There was a certain amount of archaeology involved, and the York Archaeological Trust (and their consultancy arm[2]), was subcontracted to GHK, who were working for the IADB (Inter-American Development Bank) to prepare a proposal for St. Ann's.

Tourism in Jamaica was quite well developed, of course, in terms of sun, sea and sand themes. There were already some notable luxury resorts, but the cultural dimension had not been much exploited. Now the IADB wanted to move in a different direction, and we proposed not only to rehabilitate the Great House and the agricultural industry works, and water wheel, etc., but also recreate the African and slave housing, plantations and orchards. We also proposed to build a Visitor Centre akin to the Jorvik Viking centre in York, with full-scale models viewed by visitors from a railway.

The point here was that sufficient paying visitors should be attracted to finance the necessary investment, and this meant that the commodification of history was inevitably an issue for debate.

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[1] Gilmore Hankey Kirke.
[2] Heritage Projects Ltd.

Persistences or Permanences

The urban phenomenon of *permanences* was first posited by Marcel Poete[3] and Pierre Lavedan[4]—according to Aldo Rossi, although his own writings on the subject are probably more widely known than those of the first two. He attributes to Poete the discovery that:

> Cities tend to remain on their axes of development, maintaining the position of their original layout and growing according to the direction and meaning of their older artefacts, which often appear remote from present day ones. Sometimes these artefacts persist virtually unchanged, endowed with continuous vitality; other times they exhaust themselves, and then only the permanence of their form, their physical sign, their *locus* remains.[5]

In the former case, Rossi regards them as *monuments,* which are the 'propelling elements', whilst the latter are 'pathological'. The most valid part of Poete's theory, says Rossi, is that the streets and the plan are the most meaningful permanences in any town.

Rossi then takes one example of a monument[6] which has changed function whilst retaining all its other physical characteristics. Rossi observes that "this proves its vitality". He goes further than this, by arguing that function is not critically significant because it can change, whilst form remains the same: this flies in the face of naïve functionalism, in other words, 'modernism', which identifies form with function. Rossi is identifying monuments, building, landscape, memory and place with *art,* which Rossi (quoting Victor Hugo), sees as arising from society not from individuals:

> The greatest works of architecture are not so much individual as they are social works; rather the works of nations in labour than the inspired efforts of men of genius; the legacy of a race; the accumulated wealth of centuries, the residuum of successive evaporations of human society—in a word, a species of formation.[7]

One might see this as a somewhat nationalistic, rightist perspective these days, of course. But it is a corrective, nonetheless, to excessive individualism.

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[3] See C.N. Terranova, *Marcel Poete's Bergsonian urbanism: vitalism, time and the city.* Journal of Urban History. Sept. 2008 34; 919-943.
[4] See Pierre Lavedan 1956 Penguin.
[5] A. Rossi (1984). p59.
[6] Palazzo della Ragione in Padua.
[7] Victor Hugo, Notre Dame de Paris, quoted in Rossi 1984, p107

Similarly, it draws our attention to the relevance also of history as permanent paradigm:

> All the great eras of architecture have reproposed the architecture of antiquity anew, as if it were a paradigm established forever: but each time it is reproposed differently. Because this same idea has been manifested in different places, we can understand our own cities by measuring this standard against the actuality of the individual experience of each particular place.[8]

Rossi drew attention to a variety of cases, of course, such as the Palazzo della Ragione, Padua.[9] There are thousands of relevant such examples, no doubt, but here we will mention only ten. They are not organised in any deliberate sequence.

(i) Christ Church Oxford.[10] See fig.1.1. which shows four quadrangles leading from St. Aldate's Street and identifies construction within a consistent but effortlessly unified spatial framework dating from the twelfth to the eighteenth centuries. See also fig. 1.2, a small-scale plan of all the colleges at Oxford.[11]

(ii) Piece Hall, Halifax. See fig. 1.3, which shows the floor plan.[12] RCHM 1939 also shows other piece halls (i.e. cloth markets), some on circular layouts which are strikingly similar to the Foro Bonoparto, Milan, shown in Rossi 1984. They are similar to the *Sferisterio* or forum in Macerata and the various Roman fora shown in Rossi.

(iii) Aleppo commercial district. See fig. 1.4.[13] This contains eight *hans* in the form of squares, (redolent of the Halifax Piece Hall), as well as the *Ulu Jami* and covered streets of the bazaar, dating from the thirteenth century.

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[8] Rossi 1984, p107.
[9] See Rossi, op. cit., p29-30.
[10] See Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, England (RCHM) 1939. Opposite p32.
[11] See RCHM, op. cit., opposite p136
[12] See Philip Smithies 1988.
[13] M. Cezar 1983, p73.

(iv) Floor plan of cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. See fig. 1.5.[14] This plan, and numerous other similar ones, inspired the Tête Défense plan which had similarly a cruciform plan, expanded outwards to encompass the cloisters etc. within a single unified system.

(v) Hôtel des Invalides, Paris. See fig. 1.6.[15] This includes the Dome des Invalides, a secondary church including the tomb of Napoleon Bonaparte. It also includes several museums of vast length, forming fifteen courtyards in an orthogonal structure.

(vi) Galleria Vittorio Emanuele 11, Milan; block plan. See fig. 1.7.[16] This shows the cruciform plan in relationship to the cathedral. The floor plan of the galleria is shown in fig. 1.8.

(vii) Ascoli Piceno, plan of the *Piazza del Popolo*, showing the church of S. Francesco, the colonnades fronting shops with housing behind and above them; the palazzo of the *Capitano dei Popolo*, etc. See fig. 1.9.[17]

(viii) Gota square, Gothenburg. Plan proposal by Gunnar Asplund. See fig. 10[18] This shows a square on rising ground, rather like the Court square in the Telford scheme.

(ix) La Plata town plan, Argentina. See fig. 1.11.[19] This remarkable, perfectly symmetrical, orthogonal grid, with diagonals and piazzas / parks at intersections, was planned as a provincial capital and begun around 1880. It was based on identical blocks and superblocks. The architect was Pedro Benoit.

(x) Carnaervon; floor plan of castle and town. See fig. 1.12.[20] This illustrates a fortified town which was an inspiration for the central portion of the Telford town centre design shown below, in which

[14] See P.N. Palacio, 2004 p67.
[15] See K. Baedecker. 1904. Opposite p296.
[16] See J.F. Geist, 1979, p224
[17] See F. Mariano, 1995, Fig.351.
[18] See G. Holmdahl, et al 1950. p34
[19] See Touring Club Italiano, 1932, opposite p134
[20] See W. Anderson, 1970, p144.

> the existing road box was similar to the river-system inasmuch as it defined the 'wall-building' which bounded the layout as a whole.

In chapters 5 and 6 of this book, I refer to several cases of this manifestation of continuity at Tête Défense, Hérouville Saint Clair, Telford—all three competitions—and Thamesmead Town, Silvertown Bridge in London, and Tampere in Finland. In all six cases, there were certainly contextual landscapes, but more or less no existing towns at the outset, so in urban terms one had to design something largely or entirely new. In all cases, however, I tried to create something that emerged from either the landscape (or, better to say, the *genus loci)* or my appreciation of the historical background—what Victor Hugo called 'a species of formation'.

In Telford I recall in particular the idea of a huge 'citadel' of buildings, a wall—so to speak—wrapping round the existing square 'box road', defining the boundary of the inner area and differentiating its inside and outside. See figs. 5.9. I also proposed an outer ring of geometrically ramped earthen embankments that ran alongside a proposed outer box road and enclosed future multi-storey car parks, and would be analogous to a mediaeval city wall.

In the urban design competition for the new town centre of Hérouville Saint-Clair, the similar notion of a 'wall' was used, with points of entry, on a gate analogy, through it. I remember being transfixed by the town plans I found in Baedecker guides of the late nineteenth century. Camillo Sitte would have been inspired by them, I think. In the case of the Tête Défense competition, there was a clear invitation to consider the site as the termination of the tremendous axis from the Jardin des Tuilleries via the Champs Elysee and the Arc de Triomphe. It seemed to me obvious that a monument was called for, not only because the notion of Communication in the brief implied a *grand projet,* but also because its locus was to be the culmination of Haussmann's most remarkable axis. The monument, to me, was akin to a cathedral in form. The main front would face east along the Champs Élysées to the Arc de Triomphe, inviting entrance, so to speak, whilst the west front would echo the semi-circular form of the ring road/motorway.

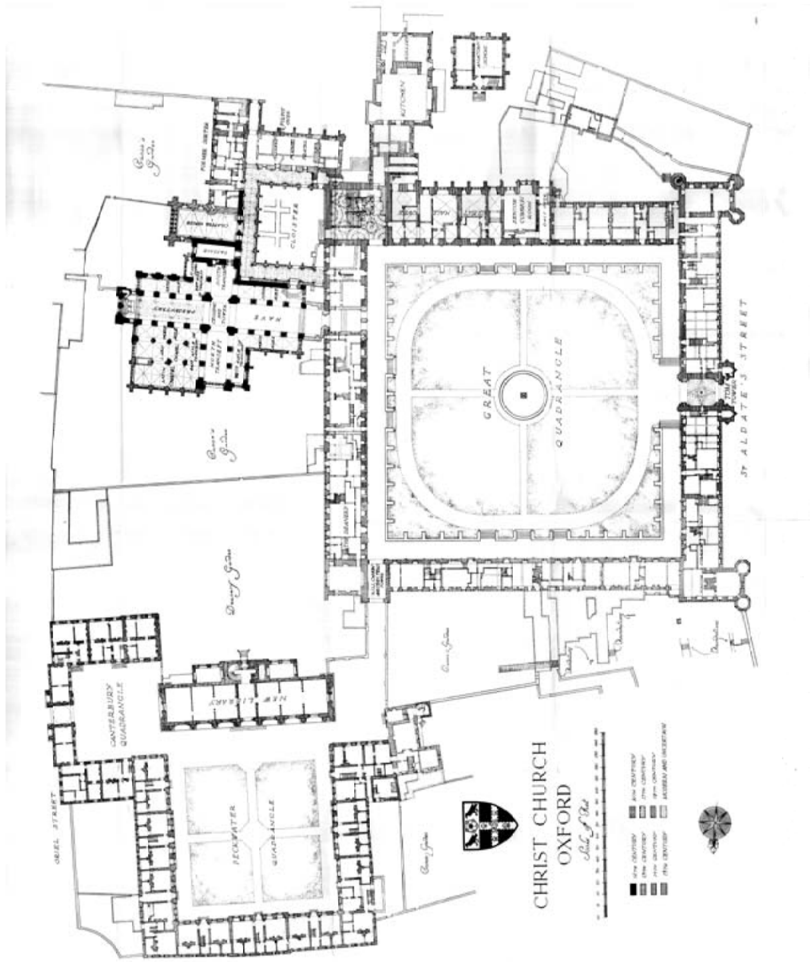

Fig.1.1. Christ Church college floor plan, Oxford. (From the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, England. 1939.)

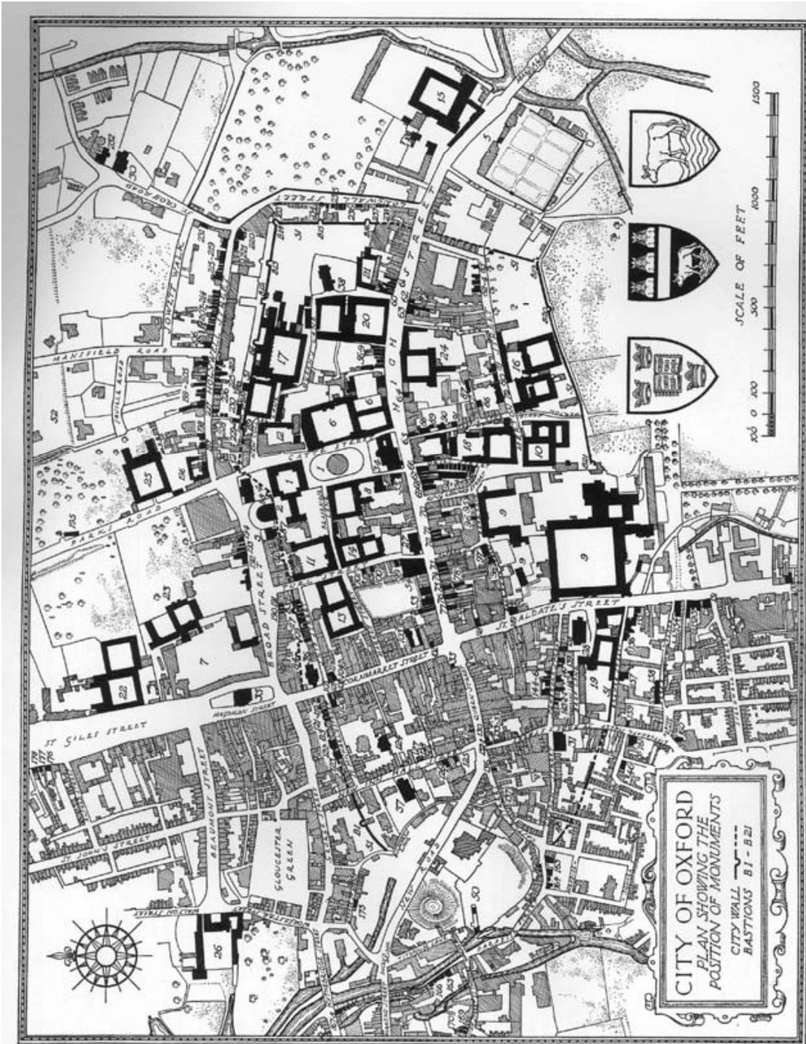

Fig.1.2. Plan of central part of Oxford. (From the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, England. 1939.)

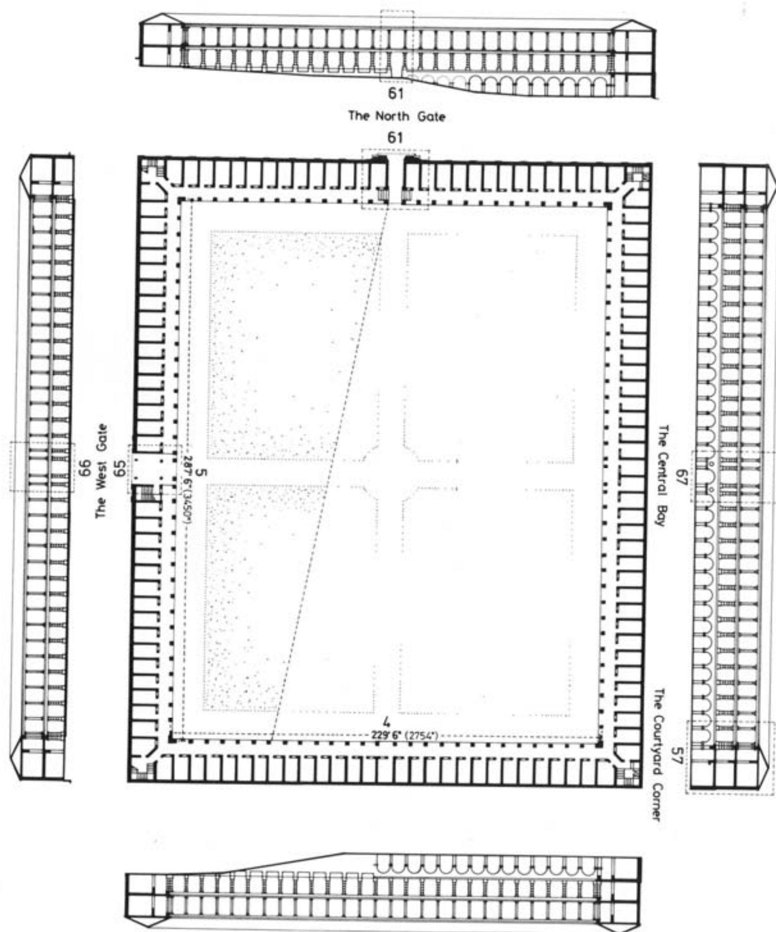

Fig.1.3. Piece Hall, Halifax, floor plan. (From P. Smithies. 1988.)

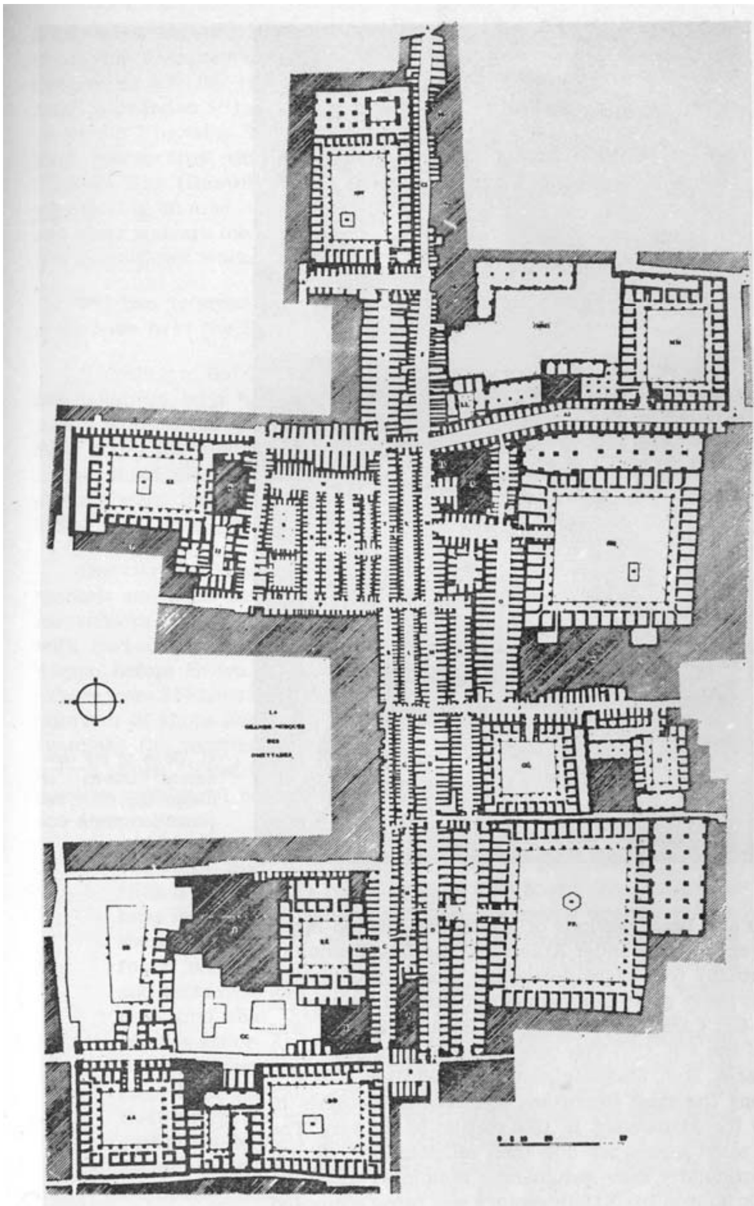

Fig.1.4. Aleppo commercial district plan. (From M. Cezar. 1983.)

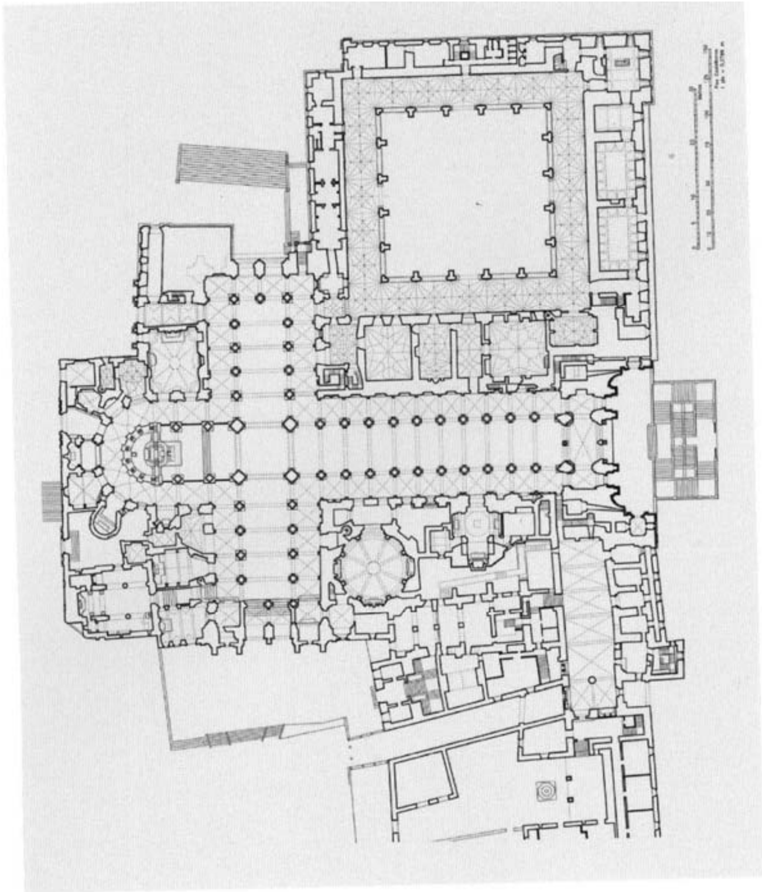

Fig. 1.5. Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, floor plan, (From Palacio P.N. 2004.).