

embraces the body' against the Cartesian, modern and dynamic meaning of place as the relationship of a body with others, of association with the context.

It is, in fact, a more complex phenomenon, as the lockdown condition seems to make a core aspect of the metropolitan dream close and achievable, that of the fully connected world, of the universal network that makes everything synchronous over time, all coexistent in space (Allen, 2020). Although there are not real qualitative innovations in the media, the quantitative problem affects such a vast scale as to propose radically new scenarios (the transfer of work at home involved up to 94 per cent of employees of Italian public administrations). Virtual communities, intangible aggregations formed through IT platforms, are multiplying. One can still work with colleagues, sometimes in better conditions, even if one does not go to the workplace every day. Computer-based tools that, until February 2020, involved specialist networks have suddenly become the norm in millions of houses. In universities, we give lessons to students segregated in their own homes in China, Turkey, South America and many other distant countries. The relationship between house and commercial spaces is also changing, perhaps irreversibly. It is not foreseeable where the uncontrolled acceleration of e-commerce that is emptying the roads of traditional commerce will lead. Relationships and exchanges between individuals also become more and more immaterial but not *inhumane*, as has been suggested.

The idea of *humanity* itself is changing. This new condition has its own physical response that is not necessarily harmful. The innovative forms of communication can collaborate with the existing city by integrating (not replacing) physical

relationships, also giving the existing fabric a new meaning and future.

I believe that, within the framework of this general situation, as architects it is necessary to rethink urban fabrics according to an 'ethical' model, where the house acquires a new role in the urban context and becomes a new place where the inhabitants live, but also a productive asset, considering that smart working will also be the choice of many tertiary activities, which Covid has only accelerated. This is a model that could, by reducing travel time for work and offering an alternative to the city economy, civilize the public spaces of the historical city by transforming them from places reserved for wild tourist consumption into new shared nodes where life flowing into the city converges.

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Alnwick: conservation or transformation?

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This Viewpoint identifies an example in which M. R. G. Conzen's research experience and professional planning training were combined in

a successful campaign against an inappropriate redevelopment proposal. It illustrates and reinforces the link between morphologically-



Figure 1. (Left) Alnwick building survey by M. R. G. Conzen, 1964 (Source: Conzen Collection, Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham by permission of M. P. Conzen). (Right) photograph (Source: M. R. G. Conzen, 1960, plate I – excerpt).

related academic study and professional practice.

M. R. G. Conzen is widely recognized for his remarkable work as a geographer. However, he had also obtained a diploma in Town and Country Planning (1936, Victoria University of Manchester) and was an associate member of the Town Planning Institute (later the Royal Town Planning Institute) from 1937 until his death in 2000. Earlier in his career, before engaging in geography teaching (first in the University of Manchester and then in the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, formerly part of the University of Durham), he worked as a Senior Assistant to W. Dobson Chapman, Consultant in Regional and Town Planning, in Macclesfield, Cheshire (between 1936 and 1940). He left professional practice because of the problem of being seen as an ‘enemy alien’ in wartime (M. R. G. Conzen, 1986). Chapman was Town Planning Institute President in 1943–4 and responsible for several urban plans, including an informal one for Macclesfield (Chapman, 1944). The concept of ‘conservation’ was emerging only slowly in UK town planning, and even after the Second World War, many plans suggested comprehensive redevelopment, with little or no attention to the specific built context. For instance, in his Macclesfield plan, Chapman only used the word ‘reconstruction’ for the remains of the old castle – expressing a narrow view of the concept (Larkham, 2003).

Conzen’s interest in planning practice – including conservation – persisted in his subsequent academic work (M. R. G. Conzen, 1958, 1966,

1975) which charts his search for a theory of urban landscape management (Larkham, 1990; Oliveira, 2021; Whitehand, 1981), and his participation in public community activities.

Conzen studied the Northumberland market town of Alnwick in detail for several years. After a long process (Monteiro, 2017), his key monograph ‘Alnwick, Northumberland: a study in town-plan analysis’ (M. R. G. Conzen, 1960) was published. It was intended as the first of a trilogy covering all three ‘urban form complexes’. Hence Conzen continued to study the town in the following years and, in 1964, he carried out a second survey on building types (Figure 1) (M. R. G. Conzen, 2004b [1964]). In 1965, 5 years after the publication of the monograph, a large private redevelopment plan for central Alnwick was proposed.

As reported in the newspapers, this proposal envisaged the demolition of the major part of the town centre and construction of a new modernist shopping centre ‘typical of any present-day shop development which lacks the individuality present in old towns’ (Robertson, 1965). The initiative, proposed by Costain Property Investments Ltd following its work on a small retail refurbishment, became known as the Costain plan (Figure 2), and was designed by architects Willoughby Fletcher and Associates. At a special meeting of Alnwick Urban Council on 9 March 1965 a report on the Alnwick centre redevelopment was approved in principle by 11 votes to 2. The chairman made the statement ‘that all over the country, old townships were considering the renewal of their decayed and dilapidated town centres’ (Leath, 1965).

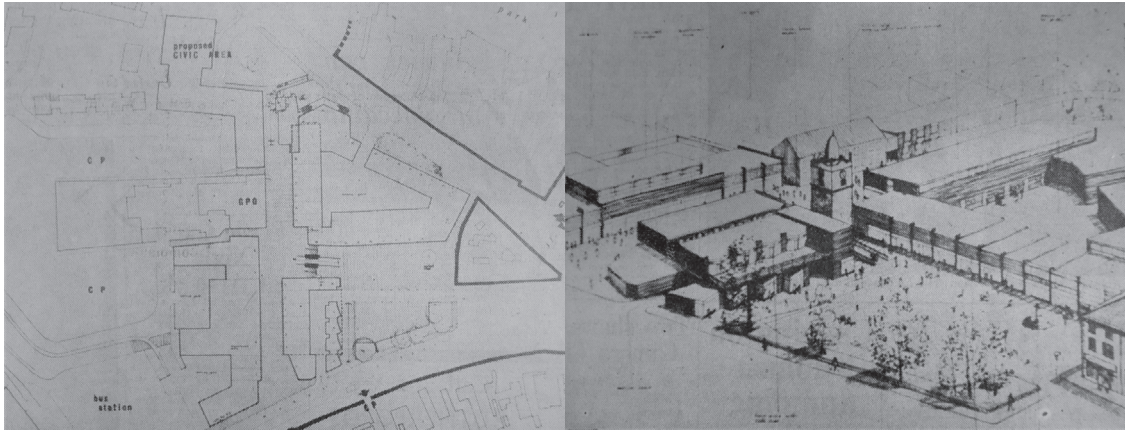


Figure 2. Costain plan in *Northumberland Gazette*, 12 March, 1965.

In the meantime, when the Costain plan was under consideration, the local civil society started to speak out, both for and against the project. Shortly after the council meeting, a public meeting disapproved of the plan, by 400 to 6 votes. The architectural critic Ian Nairn, an outspoken critic of much post-war urban development, criticised the plan. He said that, instead of a small-scale and sensitive improvement, suitable to the scale of Alnwick as a small market town, it proposed ‘a scheme which rips out the heart of the town, leaving only the Town Hall tower, and replacing the old, mixed frontages by straightedged buildings of colossal banality’ (Nairn, 1965).

Those in opposition to the Costain plan formed the Alnwick Society (precursor to the current Alnwick Civic Society, founded in 1974) which was committed to conserving and enhancing the town’s built environment. It was registered with the national Civic Trust as an official local amenity society, and intended to use its influence with proper procedures and well-informed arguments. As the secretary explained, the purpose was to oppose ‘any large-scale reconstruction along the lines of the Costain plan as being economically, socially and architecturally inappropriate for this particular town’ (Adamson, 1965).

M. R. G. Conzen was a committee member of the Alnwick Society and, in May 1965, he spoke publicly in opposition to the Costain plan. He had previously stated his great concern about the demolition of the old town centre and outlined an opposition response in a letter to Ian A. Robertson (one of the two councillors who first voted against the proposal, and treasurer of the Alnwick Society). Conzen stressed that Alnwick’s uniqueness depended on the preservation of the

Old Town’s street layout and building fabric which together ‘make this place an impressive and unique historical monument in perfect accord with the obviously important and interesting Castle’. Conzen had explained in detail, in his monograph, the individuality of the great Central Triangle of streets (Bondgate-Narrowgate, Fenkle Street, Market Street), with the small street blocks around the market place, the plot layouts and building arrangements. He also emphasized the Northern Georgian and Regency stone houses making up street frontages in the central triangle, along Narrowgate and Bailiffgate, along with Bondgate Tower, the Town Hall and the Assembly Rooms. In addition to the educational, cultural and aesthetic significance of Alnwick’s historic townscape, Conzen suggested that the argument against the Costain plan should be structured around the economic interest of the town’s heritage. This emerges from his 1950s work on Whitby (M. R. G. Conzen, 1958, 2004a [1959]), and his reading of contemporary planning literature. An adequate understanding of the long-term economic asset – which he believed was likely to be represented back then and in the following 30 years – should not be sacrificed to some commercial short-term interests. ‘So far then from destroying the existing townscape, the Council and property owners should concentrate on the important business of preserving it’. Conzen remembered that, since 1960, he had taken many foreign colleagues to Alnwick and all appreciated its unique central triangle of streets as well as the Castle, stressing the need to clean and preserve both streets and buildings. However, Conzen believed that the same visitors would hardly be interested in seeing the ‘aesthetic competitiveness of modern English architects in

little Alnwick when they can do it so much better in London or maybe Newcastle'. He also believed that this would become even more pertinent when comparing Alnwick's attractiveness for living, working, and sight-seeing not only with 'the modern Newcastle and historic Edinburgh, but with hundreds of more comparable small places in the south and in the continent' (M. R. G. Conzen, 1965).

Due to the efforts of a remarkable group of people, the plan was not implemented. Today, the 'attractive marketplace' and the great triangle with its 'old charm', 'beautiful old stone buildings', with regular markets and events, specialized shops, and many cafes, along with the old Castle and the new Alnwick Garden, attract thousands of visitors every year. Furthermore, according to a 2002 *Country Life* survey, Alnwick was the most 'picturesque market town' in Northumberland and the best place to live in Britain (Mitchel, 2002). In 2020, it was listed in *The Sunday Times* as one of the top 10 locations to live in the North and North-east of England (*The Sunday Times*, 2020).

M. R. G. Conzen and those involved in the 1960s efforts to prevent the destruction of the old town centre would certainly feel a sense of accomplishment. Recently their contribution was recognized in a book about *Some Alnwick heritage heroes*, where Conzen features as one 'heritage hero' who has 'raised Alnwick's profile around the world in the planning conservation and human geography profession' (Alnwick Civic Society, 2017). As Michael P. Conzen said, his father would probably 'be uncomfortable with any characterization as a 'hero', but he would undoubtedly feel glad that his interest in, and findings about, Alnwick were considered of value by a later generation of custodians of the town's cultural heritage' (M. P. Conzen, 2018).

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