

Evolution of Urban Districts: Elements and Forces of Change

William Grimes, AICP
Eric Lee

This paper attempts to develop a framework by which to understand and analyze the change that is constantly occurring in urban districts. By increasing our awareness of that change, how it operates and how it influences the surrounding area, the authors contend that planning efforts, in particular those for revitalization, can better achieve their goals and more effectively utilize public investment. In this paper, the theoretical approach is first outlined and then applied to two urban districts in the cities of Liverpool and Chester, England.

Elements of a District

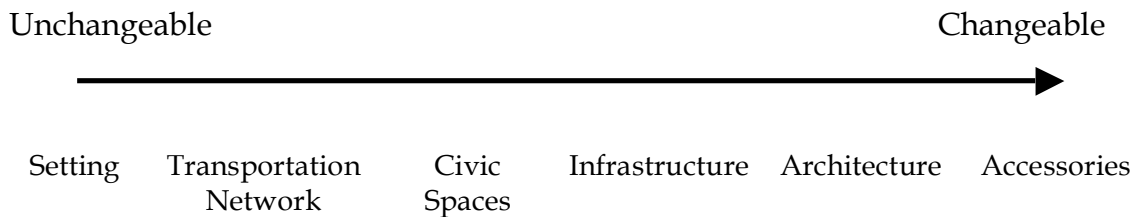
In his work on the “shearing layers” of buildings, Brand (1994) described six distinct parts of a building that exhibit varying rates of change. He explained the lifecycles of the different parts and the frequency at which they changed. The differing rates of change had consequences for its cost as well as for how people related to it. For this work, that concept and those categories were adapted to describe six elements composing urban districts and the relative frequency at which they change.

Setting The topographical and geographical environment of the district is the most stable and fixed element. Environmental characteristics provide opportunities and limitations for land use. Setting is essentially unchangeable.

Transportation Network The system of roads and rights-of-way in a district sets the pattern for development. New routes, when built or expanded, generally occur over older and existing routes. Transportation networks are well-established and difficult to change.

- Civic Spaces** Spaces that serve civic and social functions for a district are durable institutions. Over the years, their uses change according to need until they no longer serve a public function. Civic spaces change slowly.
- Infrastructure** Sewer, water, electricity, and telephone lines provide services needed for urban districts. They require routine maintenance and upgrading. Infrastructure changes on a regular basis.
- Architecture** Buildings, houses and other structures are the most visible part of a district and often define a district’s character. The architecture of a district continually evolves as new buildings go up, styles change, and modifications occur. Architecture changes frequently.
- Accessories** Signs, plantings, light fixtures, awnings and street furniture have both ornamental and functional uses for a district. Incorporation of new materials and colors can distinguish districts. Accessories change constantly.

The rate of change of the six district elements ranges from the unchangeable “setting” to the extremely changeable “accessories.”

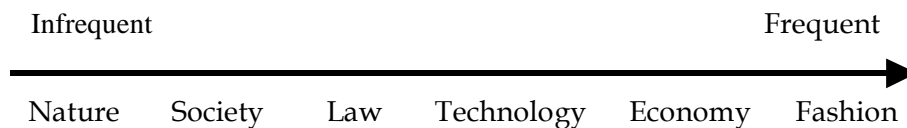


Forces of Change

We identified six forces of change that influence the form and appearance of districts, roughly corresponding to the six elements.

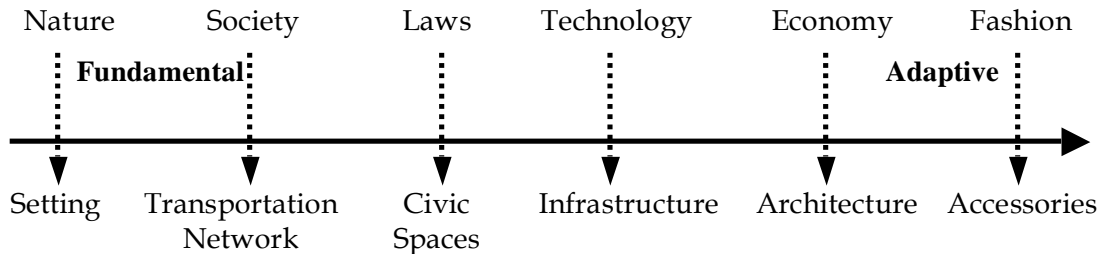
Nature	Natural forces include weathering and decay as well as natural disasters like earthquakes, floods and fire.
Society	Social, cultural and demographic changes occur through shifts in population, ethnic groups, cultural norms and values.
Law	Layers of regulations, ordinances, and codes shape districts. The force of law filters down into the myriad of decisions affecting the built environment.
Technology	Technological advances in transportation, communications, and manufacturing influence what is built and how it is built. Building and construction materials change. Technology creates relatively rapid change.
Economy	Economic forces include the transformation of an industrial base, economic cycles of investment and job growth, as well as day-to-day economic competition. Economic forces generate constant flux.
Fashion	Forces of fashion dictate constant change to suit new styles and tastes. Colors and facades, design and landscaping, all are changeable.

These six forces vary according to the speed at which they generate change.



Relation Between Forces and Elements

In addition to different rates of change, both elements and forces vary in the degree of change from fundamental to adaptive.



Natural forces create fundamental changes in a district with widespread consequences for all of the elements. The setting is most influenced by natural forces.

Changes in the transportation system rely heavily upon social and cultural forces. While changes in the economy and technology gave rise to the automobile, it was not until it infiltrated the wider society that its influence on the transportation system was really seen.

Civic spaces are part of the public realm, largely controlled and regulated by public decisions. Laws proscribe behavior and the use of public places and also prevent infringement on the public realm.

Improvements and changes in infrastructure are largely the result of technological changes. Cable and high-speed computer lines entail whole new systems. Utilities must adapt to changing technologies.

Economic forces determine profitable land uses, resulting in buildings appropriate for that use. It determines the location of office buildings, warehouses, apartments and often whether historic buildings will be preserved.

The decorative parts of districts are the most adaptive features because they respond to the whims of fashion. Accessories are easiest to change.

Economic Costs & Public Involvement

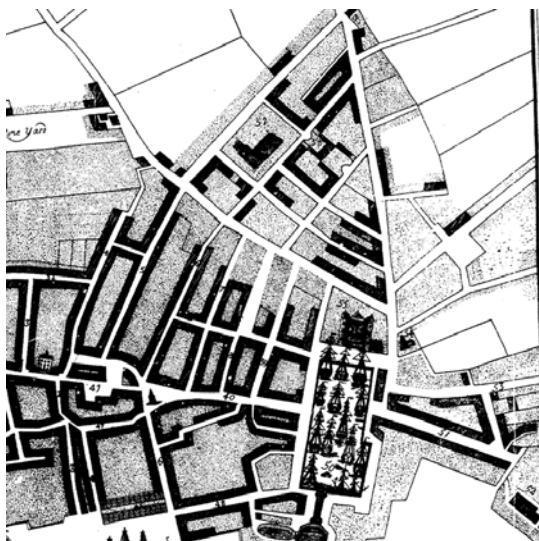
At times when the forces of change are strong, change may come about spontaneously, as if on its own. In cases when the above forces are not creating the desirable change, planning efforts ensue. However, characteristics of the six elements have consequences for the economic cost and degree of public involvement that may be needed. While changes to the more fundamental elements of “setting” and “transportation network” can be quite costly, changes to the more adaptive elements, like “architecture” and “accessories,” can be less expensive.

A corollary relationship is the degree of public and private involvement in funding the change. Greater cost requires greater public investment and more unified decision-making. The more fundamental elements demand more active public involvement. At the other end of the scale, lower costs, private ownership, and dispersed decision-making places investment in the adaptive elements largely in the hands of the private sector.

Examination of districts in two English cities bears out these relationships.

Study Districts - Liverpool, Chester

Born in the mid-eighteenth century, the Rope Walks district in Liverpool was first home to rope factories, merchant seamen and mercantile businessmen and later became an area for warehouses and dockside worker housing. Early in the 20th century, it entered a stage of decay and economic decline from which it has still not recovered, suffering further damage during World War Two. Today, the Rope Walks district is the subject of an international effort in Europe to revitalize decayed central city areas.

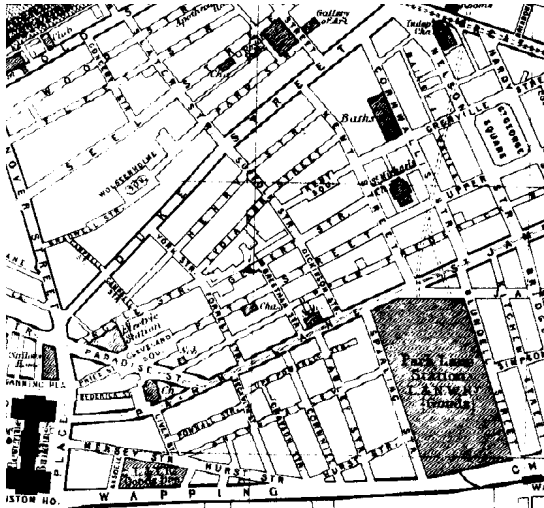


Liverpool's Rope Walks in 1725

Encompassing about 50 acres, the Rope Walks is now a jumble of nightclubs, abandoned and occupied warehouses, retail shops, restaurants and offices. The streets are narrow, and many buildings are shabby and neglected. Efforts during the 1960's to demolish the district's older buildings and increase access by automobile to the central business district were blocked by a growing popular preservation sentiment. The Rope Walks, until recently remained in much the same state as it did when the last bomb fell in 1942.

Chester's Bridgegate district, also approximately 50 acres, was originally settled

during Roman times. The town's layout is based along a symmetrical cross with gates at each of the four entrances to the city. Chester served as a major military and commercial port until the river silted, effectively closing the docks. With the port's failure, Chester emphasized its role as a regional office/retail center and tourist destination, managing the transition relatively successfully.



Liverpool's Rope Walks in 1906

Though Chester possessed some of the most colorful and bustling retail spaces found in England, much of the activity was occurring outside the Bridgegate district. Retail spaces were failing and the buildings, some constructed in the fifteenth century, were in decay and remaining vacant. The "Rows", a retail architecture unique to Chester, began to disappear in Bridgegate as new construction eschewed the district's failing retail market and accommodated the demand for office and residential space.

While Liverpool sought to raze and rebuild, and then followed the preservation course only by default, Chester embraced

preservation from the outset. Bridgegate became the first preservation district in England in the mid 1970's, with the expressed intent of regenerating economic activity through an active course of rehabilitation and adaptive reuse. Over the past 25 years, Bridgegate has experienced some success, reestablishing its retail presence and more effectively integrating new land uses into the district's historic fabric.

Revitalization Efforts

Liverpool's Rope Walks district is experiencing massive investment aimed at revitalizing and transforming the area. Over a 3-year period, about £40 million (\$64 million) of public money along with £50million (\$80 million) from the private sector will be invested. Most of the public investment in the physical structure will go to pedestrian and transportation improvements, new public squares, and renovation of strategic buildings (Liverpool Rope Walks Partnership, 2000). Private investment has already rehabilitated many structures and will continue to focus on the districts' architecture and accessories.

The overall aim of the project is to create new jobs with the hope that the increased local jobs will drive an increased demand on housing in the district. To effectively produce the type of commercial evolution sought, the Rope Walks Partnership, a non-profit organization leading the effort, has invested in transport, civic space and utility enhancement. New streets, new plazas and upgraded utility service, including fiber-

optic cabling, now line or dot the district. New buildings under construction and rising property values indicate that some of the investment is working.

Changes in the Rope Walks are fundamental in nature, requiring modifications in some of the area's basic components. This approach is not entirely unfamiliar in Liverpool, where the River Mersey had been radically altered to accommodate the great port plans of the eighteenth century and where the reconstruction after World War Two resulted in vast changes to the city's transport network. The Partnership is working to weave its fundamental changes within the fabric of a historic district. Even with these limitations, the proposals have been grand, striving to enhance what is historic through a combination of adaptive reuse and investment in infrastructure.

It is important to note that public investment has spearheaded the regeneration efforts, moving ahead the types of projects typically associated with more significant municipal undertakings. Public money has bought new streets, subsidized new utility lines, underwritten master planning efforts, built public squares and improved strategic sites for eventual construction. Now that the majority of public funds have been spent on site, transport and civic spaces, the private sector will be expected to invest in the continued evolution of the district.

Bridgewater began its preservation effort under the active and fiduciary stewardship of the City of Chester. At the outset of its program in the 1970's, Chester invested great sums of public funds into the district, sponsoring rehabilitation programs and deferring taxes for preservation projects. As the past 25 years have progressed, the degree of public investment has declined, giving way to an increased private participation as market forces have proven that the investment will generally bring rewards. The City needed to invest in the architecture and accessories of the district, but, as the success of the district's evolution became evident, the City was able to become less financially involved, allowing private money to sustain and drive changes.

In contrast to the Rope Walks, Chester's Bridgewater district experienced gradual change and smaller amounts of investment. Public funding targeted critical structures, but most of the conservation money came from the private sector. Over £1 million is invested each year in the city for the restoration of buildings. However, public involvement has been sustained over many years with a significant cumulative effect.

Conclusions

Comparing the two districts reveals how the types of strategic investment are tailored to the uses within each district. The more fundamental change that is being attempted in the Rope Walks has driven public investment toward site and transportation. It is also a more complex approach. Bridgewater's emphasis on its architecture and accessories required less public investment and involvement. A further area of

investigation might be to look into the differences between industrial, commercial, and residential districts.