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# Diverse Morphology

## A Study of Chancery Square

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### Abstract

The design of the urban environment is a challenging and complex exercise. The way people experience and use public open spaces is a valuable source of information for planning our cities. Indeed, understanding how these urban spaces are used and perceived by their occupants can provide a platform for learning and testing their adequacy and success. Based on research conducted in downtown Auckland – at the Chancery Square project – this paper investigates the way urban compositions influence our perceptions of space, and the effects spatial elements have psychologically on their occupants. The paper identifies urban aspects that stimulate the use and perception of such open spaces; in particular, enclosure, the outdoor room, datum lines, here and there, compression, release, deflection of sightlines and occupied territory.

### Introduction

“A town is a large enough artefact to embrace a host of opposites,” proposes Peter F. Smith in his book *The Dynamics of Urbanism*. He continues, “It should be a place

of security and peace as well as exciting teleological, exploratory and problem-solving drives.”<sup>1</sup>

Constructed over twenty years ago, Chancery Square, in and of itself, is arguably unremarkable compared to its counterparts in the perpetually developing city of Auckland. Yet it is the unpresumptuous nature of the square that diversifies the landscape, enabling a complex environment to eventuate.

In the 1840s, the narrow alleyways of the Chancery Square area were not a welcome addition to Auckland city’s fabric, as the close proximity of the buildings enabled an environment afflicted with overcrowding and prostitution.<sup>2</sup> Auckland’s street pattern, although originally designed in concentric rings, in reality resulted in a more traditional orthogonal grid pattern as it would allow less complications when subdividing.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, during the first land sales in April 1841, the less desired land of Chancery Street was seized up by speculators for the sole purpose of subdividing into lots as little as 3m wide<sup>4</sup> while the land on the main streets of Shortland

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1. Peter F. Smith, *The Dynamics of Urbanism* (London: Routledge, 1974), 221.  
2. Sarah Macready and James Robinson, *Slums and Self-improvement: The History and Archeology of the Mechanics Institute, Auckland, and its Chancery Street Neighbourhood*. Science and Research Internal Report No. 91 (Wellington: Department of Conservation, 1990), 104.  
3. Leon Hoffman and Auckland Council, *A Brief History of Auckland’s Urban Form* (Auckland: Auckland Council, 2019), 13.  
4. Macready and Robinson, *Slums and Self-improvement*, 103.

Figure 1. The closed vista between the two turrets signals both an entrance and a transition from the distractive openness of Freyberg Place to a more orderly and peaceful enclosed environment.



Crescent (now Street) and Queen Street permitted better living conditions. Presently, Chancery Square remains set back far enough from the main streets that its narrow paths do not result in crowding and allows for the square to continue to benefit the surrounding environment.

Chancery Square boasts urban aspects unlike those featured in the surrounding built environment; aspects such as enclosure and the idea of ‘the outdoor room,’ as well as varying datum lines, a deflection of sightlines, and an interplay between compression and release. The combination of these architectural features amalgamates into a unique set of characteristics that juxtapose the urban attributes of its surroundings and thus contribute to a diverse architectural environment within downtown Auckland.

Based on studies by Smith, Cullen and Del Rio, this paper investigates and discusses the spatial qualities of this peculiar urban environment. Through the production of serial vision drawings – as part of an observer-participant experience exercise – its urban aspects are presented and analysed, illustrating the diverse morphology generated by the Chancery Square project.

## Enclosure and the ‘Outdoor Room’

Chancery Square resides within Auckland City between two spaces clear of a built environment; Albert Park inhabits the rise to the southeast of Chancery Square while Freyberg Place occupies the opening to the west. Chancery Square links the two spaces, instigating a relationship between the exposure of the two spaces void of buildings and the enclosure of the square itself.

Hand in hand with the experience of an exposed place is

the subjection to the noise and speed of other inhabitants. It may be observed that Chancery Square, alternatively, provides a haven from the exposure of the two expanses, as upon entering the square the user is funnelled through a closed vista between two turrets (Figure 1). The function of the closed vista both establishes a clear entrance into the square and, more actively, controls the path of the occupants so that the movement within the square appears more orderly and therefore facilitates an environment that is more peaceful than the disorder outside the enclosure of the square.

Gordon Cullen, in his book *The Concise Townscape*, raises a corollary to that of enclosure that establishes the term ‘outdoor room,’<sup>5</sup> which illustrates the nature of Chancery Square. Due to the proximity of the buildings that enclose the square, the storefronts appear as interior walls and fabricate an area that is utilised in a manner reminiscent of that of an indoor room. Cullen states that “the people who [colonise the outdoors] will attempt to humanise the landscape in just the same way they do for the interiors.”<sup>6</sup>

Both the comparative enclosure and humanisation of an ‘outdoor room’ go to prove that Chancery Square diversifies its urban environment by providing intimacy and security that are able to balance the exposure of its surroundings. Enclosure is not without its downfalls, however, as an enclosed space has only limited space and thus a maximum occupation. Hence, if Chancery Square existed closer to the populated streets of Auckland, such as Queen Street, the encompassing shop faces would diminish the effect of the square and turn it into a space likely to feel more claustrophobic and unable to fulfil its function. In this regard, Chancery Square is not designed to support a mass of occupants and has thus failed at becoming a noteworthy location with the ability to draw occupants in.

## Datum Lines

The topographical context of Chancery Square continues to enhance the sense of security and intimacy felt within the square through its varying datum lines. Upon entering the square from Freyberg Place, the occupant is yet to be subjected to a change in ground level that would have any effect on how they would position themselves on a vertical axis. Continuing further into the square, however, the steps towards Albert Park become visually apparent,

5. Gordon Cullen, *The Concise Townscape* (London: Architectural Press, 1996), 28.

6. *Ibid.*

## Diverse Morphology / Haley and Wagner

Figure 2. Datum lines in urban design can enhance the senses of the occupants: feelings of intimacy and protection when below datum, to authority and privilege when positioned above the ground.



establishing both an impending release from the square as well as a suggestive change in ground level (Figure 2). By approaching the steps, and thus the idea that one is now beneath ground level, the sensitivity of being below datum begins to form, which allows the square to assume an intimate character. Cullen speculates that an occupant positioned below datum experiences feelings of intimacy perhaps deriving from “the primitive hunt or from the doctrine of heaven and hell.”<sup>7</sup> In this case, where vulnerability is not a trait desired in a public space, it is one that would not describe Freyberg Place nor Albert Park and, thus, does indeed continue to diversify the surrounding landscape. To climb the steps and alter one’s position within the space now places the inhabitant above the datum line of the square, allowing for a completely opposing psychological effect to take over the senses. To be above datum may produce feelings of authority and privilege, as if the observer is placed on a plinth, therefore acquiring significance from the observer’s position above the ground. This further reinforces the idea that Chancery Square provides a diverse environment from that of its surroundings as it acts as a haven that can produce a sense of security and intimacy. Outside the square, above the datum line, one would feel a different sensation.

A change in height this substantial also works to generate interest. As Gordon Cullen proposes, “visually, a change in height provides vitality...to a scene.”<sup>8</sup> Such vitality stimulates the mind of the occupant as well as establishing a direct relationship between them and their environment.



Figure 3. The stairway connecting Chancery Square to Albert Park: a threshold between the ‘Here’ and the ‘There.’

### Here and There, Compression and Release

The enclosed nature of Chancery Square designates that anywhere outside the perimeter of the square is immediately a different space, unrelated to the confines of the square. As we postulate both a ‘here’ in Chancery Square and a ‘there’ beyond its borders, it becomes clear that the urban landscape is benefited by the drama of the manipulation of these two spatial concepts (Figure 3).

Inside of the square, a pressure forms that is generated by the close proximity of the buildings enveloping the square. Gordon Cullen and Vicente del Rio have contrasting ideas on the effect of the space. Cullen’s take is that the narrowness between buildings would have a “definite effect on the pedestrian inducing a sense of unaccustomed constriction and pressure,”<sup>9</sup> yet del Rio, in his article “Urbanity, the Flâneur, and the Visual Qualities of Urban Design: A Walk in Lisbon, Portugal,”<sup>10</sup> would argue that it would produce a psychological effect of comfort due to the instinctively defensive human mind. This paper argues that the narrowness of the laneway results in a combination of both ideas: an unaccustomed constriction that may have the psychological effect of comfort.

The set of steps towards Albert Park acts as a division between the ‘here’ of Chancery Square and the ‘there’ of Albert Park. It establishes an impending exit that can be verified from within the square without permitting for the ‘hereness’ of the space to leak away into the distance.

7. Cullen, *The Concise Townscape*, 177.

8. *Ibid.*, 175.

9. *Ibid.*, 45.

10. Vicente del Rio, “Urbanity, the Flâneur, and the Visual Qualities of Urban Design: A Walk in Lisbon, Portugal.” *Focus* 12, no. 1, article 16 (2016): 69.

As the view is obscured by the set of steps, emerging from Chancery Square exhibits a stronger sense of revelation and release, all the while keeping the sanctity of the hereness within the square. It is only once the rise has been traversed that the concealed view is revealed in its fullness. The square that you emerge from and the place beyond into which you emerge each have a unique ambience that transforms between the two spaces: one of compressive ambience and a second ambience that emanates release.

This sense of release is only amplified by the stark juxtaposition between the heavy use of man-made materials within the square and the thick vegetation of the park. The use of manufactured materials is commonplace in the urban environment, but does allow the greenery and vegetation of the park to provide an experience that confronts you with the unexpected, therefore stimulating the senses while diversifying the urban landscape.

### Deflection of Sightlines

In a typically orthogonal built environment, Chancery Square not only differentiates from the grid-like fashion of the surrounding buildings by creating laneways that do not follow the established axis of the city but also introduces unprecedented curvature into its plan. In his article, Vicente del Rio asserts that this kind of “Visual stimulation caused by unpredictable, complex, and surprising urban morphologies is more engaging, aesthetically pleasing, and essential for urbanity.”<sup>11</sup>

Breaking away from the orthogonal building shape benefits Chancery Square not only by creating stimulation and a more engaging experience but also by driving the movement of its occupants. The curvature of the path generates a deflection of sightlines which in turn produces a sense of anticipation as the path must, therefore, be sought after.

In Auckland’s typical urban landscape, buildings are positioned at right angles to the main axis of the city due to the demand for ease in building and subdivision of the land in the 1840s;<sup>12</sup> this traditional grid can still be seen in Auckland’s urban fabric today. The effect that this pattern has begins to create enclosed spaces that are visually complete. As a contrast, Chancery Square diverges from



Figure 4. The figure-ground diagram illustrates the surrounding grid-like landscape of the built environment, thus highlighting Chancery Square’s detachment from the paradigm.

the main Auckland axis (Figure 4). The terminal building is positioned at an angle that implies a space that is present yet unseen. Spatial qualities such as these produce a response that can stimulate the eyes and the mind of the viewer, which can consequently drive movement and “motivate exploration,” which Peter F. Smith maintains in his book *The Dynamics of Urbanism* to be an indicator of a “creative townscape”:

*Creative townscape, that is, environment which stimulates the mind by extending its schema of urban events, generating images and motivating exploration, is not simply a matter of imaginative architecture. It is something much more subtle and complex, involving deployment of spaces, contours, solids and voids, the building-up of a host of stimulating tensions.*<sup>13</sup>

11. Ibid, 67.

12. Hoffman and Auckland Council, *A Brief History of Auckland’s Urban Form*, 13.

13. Smith, *The Dynamics of Urbanism*, 236.



Figure 5. Chancery Square's glass canopy: a focal point in the centre of the square and a provider of shade, shelter and amenities.

### Occupied Territory

As much as Chancery Square generates interest and diversifies the architectural landscape of downtown Auckland, it contends with Freyberg Place and Albert Park for static occupation. Causes of possession in an environment stem mainly from the human need for shade, shelter and amenities, all of which Chancery Square successfully provides. What Chancery Square lacks, however, is the public seating and aesthetics that make static occupation enjoyable. During the day, Chancery Square serves mainly as a convenient linkage between destinations, as Freyberg Place boasts more public seating and a vantage point that creates a more appealing view than that which Chancery Square provides.

Chancery Square does deliver a variety of stores that prevent it from becoming a purely transitional space, yet as the stores are situated within the buildings, the perceived occupation of the square is less than the reality. This is ultimately the undoing of Chancery Square. People are drawn to places with a human presence and, without this, Chancery Square loses its appeal due to the lack of character.

In saying this, while Chancery Square cannot claim to

boast an environment that is perpetually occupied, a more static inhabitation occurs where a periodic occupation is woven into the nightly routine of the square. Chancery Square sees an increase in occupation during the evenings, when the bars and restaurants open for the night, drawing in a number of patrons and generating an atmosphere that Freyberg Place and Albert Park lack.

Consequently, even during the day, when Chancery Square returns to a quiet, intimate space, the restaurant chairs and tables populate the laneways as what Gordon Cullen terms "furniture of possession."<sup>14</sup> He proposes that "although the amount of possession may be small, its perpetuation in the furniture gives the [square] humanity and intricacy in just the same way that louvres on windows give texture and scale to a building even when the sun is not shining."<sup>15</sup> In this way Chancery Square is always filled with potential occupation. Regardless of this, until night falls, potential occupation is all Chancery Square can claim.

### Conclusion

Chancery Square demonstrates the way urban compositions influence our perceptions of space and the effects these urban aspects may have psychologically on their occupants. It is a meaningful location due to its range of fundamental visual urban design qualities that permit engagement and interest, and are beneficial to downtown Auckland.

In piquing interest through engaging urban qualities, Chancery Square facilitates an environment that is both memorable and noteworthy, hidden amongst the relative monotony of its surroundings. As day turns to night, the humble cobblestone laneways evolve into a charming atmospheric courtyard separate from the clamour of the busier neighbouring streets, thus producing a thriving square that acts as an intimate location for occupants to connect and relax.

In an increasingly impersonal city, it can be proposed that Chancery Square provides a space that incites feelings of comfort, protection and control of our surroundings. A procession through the square becomes a journey of experiencing a sequence of exposures and, thus, enclosures; of heres and theres; of constraints and releases. A sequence that stimulates the occupant and establishes a complex architectural environment unique to Chancery Square.

14. Cullen, *The Concise Townscape*, 23.

15. *Ibid.*

## Authors

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