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Chester, England: Urban Design Ideas from an Ancient Source

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The elevated walkway system of Chester, England, is a remarkable urban design achievement, remarkable because what began in an unplanned and casual manner resulted in a cohesively organized town of extraordinary character. Successive generations recognized, sustained, and marvelously elaborated on the advantages of the system. The walkway network today encompasses the Rows, which are pedestrian galleries recessed from and parallel to the streets one level below; a promenade on the old town wall that encircles the city center; an elegant Victorian arcade; and a modern enclosed shopping precinct. Consequently, today one can walk through a convenient and gracious network of elevated paths and feel intimately involved with the activities of the city.

Origins and History

The Romans established Chester in 76 A.D. as a military base to subdue Wales and northern England. They strategically located the remote outpost at the crossing of a major overland route and the River Dee, which was navigable to this point.¹ The site on a land rise of more than sixty feet was further protected by the river, which wrapped around two sides. The geometric layout of the typical Roman colonial plan remains today and provides orientation for the elevated walkway as it branches out from the town's center at the Cross, the intersection of the Roman roads.

After Roman military control collapsed in the fourth century



1 Stores are located at both levels of the Rows. Eastgate Row (background) is more popular, since it is wider and more continuous than Northgate Row (foreground). Most of the "medieval" buildings actually date from the late nineteenth century. Photographs by Warren Boeschstein, 1982.



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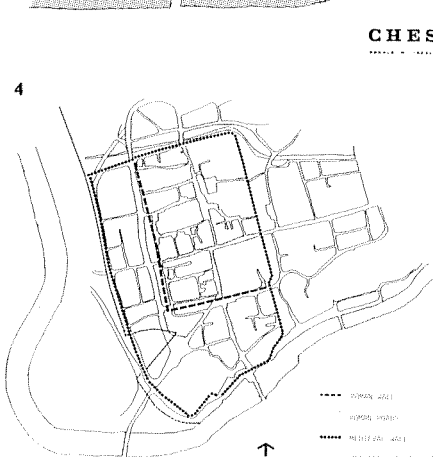
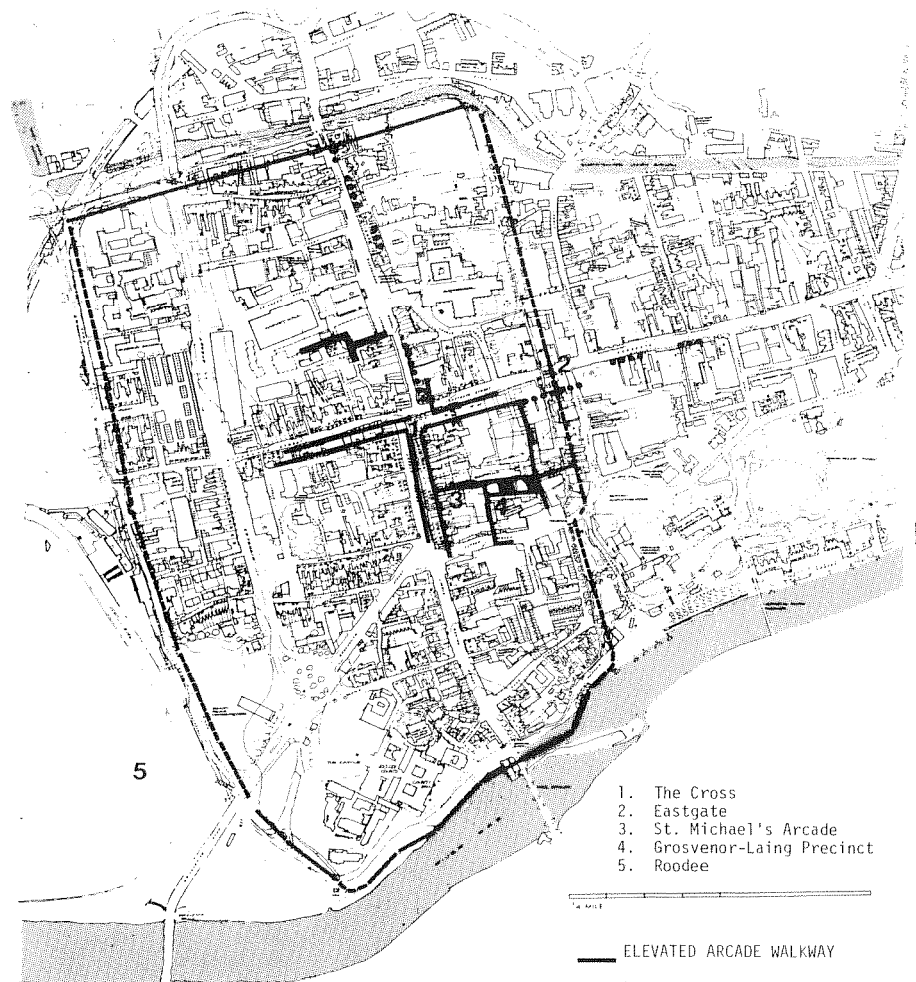
2 The Rows are galleries at the second level. These public right-of-ways have been retained even as the buildings enclosing them were replaced.

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A.D., the town's population dwindled and Roman buildings fell into ruin. During the Middle Ages, the Saxons re-established political stability and in the tenth century rebuilt the town wall, using the Roman wall foundations on the north and east but enlarging the town's perimeter on the south and west to enclose an area three times that of the original Roman camp. Chester flourished as a trading center in the following years. This period of growth culminated in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries when Chester was considered one of England's most important cities.²

There are documented references to the existence of the Rows dating from the thirteenth century;³ however, the specific origins are disputed.⁴ Currently, there are two theories considered most plausible. Advocates of the first argue that as Cestrians (citizens of Chester) rebuilt their town during the Middle Ages, they found it easier to construct over and in front of old Roman ruins rather than to remove debris. On new, filled in, and elevated ground, they erected arcades with upper floors overhanging passageways below. As the town prospered, they excavated down, exposed the lower level, and eventually used it. The fact that the upper level of Rows shops generally coincides with the old Roman building line substantiates this development theory.

Advocates of the second theory offer a simpler explanation. They believe the Rows began as ground surface arcades on the high topography where the town was originally



3 Map of Chester, indicating the layout of elevated and arcaded walkways. Base drawing prepared by Donald W. Insall and Associates, conservation consultants to the City of Chester. Source: *Chester; A Study in Conservation* (British Crown copyright). Reproduced with the permission of the Controller of Her Britannic Majesty's Stationery Office.

4 Historical diagrammatic map of Chester, illustrating alignment of Roman and medieval walls and the course of the River Dee. After illustration by Donald W. Insall and Associates.



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settled. As the town expanded down the hill slope, the Rows remained more or less level, becoming ever higher above street level and eventually occurring at the upper floor level. Remnants today of ground level arcades at the highest levels of the old settlement as well as evidence that the Rows extended further south support this theory.⁵ In either case, the lower level was initially used for storage and occasionally for shops. Gradually the shops became more numerous. Residences were primarily at the Rows level and above, which permitted neighbors to communicate easily with each other. Only in the last 150 years has retail activity expanded significantly into the Rows level.

While the architectural character of Chester, with its densely packed

buildings, gable ends facing the street, variegated skyline, and intimate details derives from the Middle Ages, most of the buildings remaining today actually date from the eighteenth and particularly the later nineteenth century. During the later Middle Ages, Chester entered a period of decline prompted by the river silting and exacerbated by plagues, civil war, and serious fire, the latter two of which wrought considerable physical damage to the town.⁶ By the Georgian period, as Chester's economy revived, substantial rebuilding was required. The medieval town wall was no longer needed for defense, but rather than demolish it, Cestrians restored the wall (1701–1708) as an amenity, turning it into a promenade. They also replaced the four medieval gates, which were part of the wall, with arches

5 A panoramic view of the southern half of Chester circa 1855 by John McGahey. The Rows at the Cross on the far right and the perimeter promenade along the wall are evident.

(1769–1808), thus spanning the entry streets and further facilitating movement at wall as well as street levels.⁷

During the Georgian period many of the houses in the central area were rebuilt or refaced with brick, the popular building material of the time. As rebuilding occurred in the four main streets, the passageways of the Rows, which were long established as public right-of-ways, were reincorporated into new construction. Consequently, in the early nineteenth century the center of Chester was a combination of deteriorated medieval timber frame and Georgian brick buildings tied together by the Rows. Many of the older buildings in the Rows, however, were not restored.

The Victorian period saw even more vigorous rebuilding. The Victorians adopted the Tudor timber frame style to replace many of Chester's medieval and even recent Georgian buildings, confusing visitors to this day as to the authenticity of "medieval" buildings. The timber frame revival reflected Cestrians' reawakened pride in their traditions.⁸

During the Victorian period, the upper classes increasingly found the suburbs of Chester more appealing than the city center as places to live, and the working classes followed as employment opportunities emerged in surrounding areas.⁹ This shift coincided with a growth of trade based not on Chester's previous shipping economy or on industry as in the Merseyside region to

the north but on commercial, administrative, and tourist activities the city was attracting. Retail activity then expanded from street level to Rows level. Fortunately, this commercial growth was gradual and compatible with Chester's building heritage.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the local Grosvenor family, with extensive property holdings in central London, rose to national prominence as the Dukes of Westminster.¹⁰ Because of their wealth, property knowledge, and paternal interest in Chester, they became progressively more influential in the town's development. As well as being politically active, they acquired land, constructed new buildings, gave property to the city, and were instrumental in sponsoring the Victorian timber frame revival.¹¹

Over the years, the Grosvenors acquired considerable property in the southeast quadrant of the town center. In 1910 they oversaw the construction of the St. Michael's Arcade, an internal glass-covered pedestrian area. More recently and ambitiously they created the Grosvenor-Laing Precinct of 1965, which includes underground parking and servicing and involved closing a retail street. The Grosvenors and other patrons employed local architects who were knowledgeable of and sympathetic to the town's traditions. Consequently, while there may not be a building by a famous architect or one of outstanding significance, today the buildings as a whole constitute a

remarkably compatible environment.¹²

The automobile impacted Chester less than it did the majority of English towns. An inner ring road, part of which was built within the boundaries of the medieval walls, did make the center more accessible. Because the physical quality of the town was well recognized and respected, the automobile remained subordinate to it. Also, the elevated walkway system facilitated pedestrian movement above vehicular traffic. Recently, the town center at the Cross was partially closed to automobiles to control the erosive influence of vehicles in this area.

Chester has also recently benefited from concerted planning. In 1966 it was selected as one of four historic towns in England to be carefully studied to reconcile conservation efforts with contemporary requirements. Since then, Donald Insall and Associates have been acting as conservation consultants.¹³ Potent design controls facilitate the maintenance and improvement of the area. These controls, exercised through the issuance or denial of Planning Consent, govern significant details such as materials and fenestration for new and renovated buildings. Historic buildings must have Listed Building Consent for alterations that affect the character of those buildings. Both of these consents are statutory requirements emanating from national legislation. However, it has been the specific Conservation Program undertaken locally by the City of Chester, aided by



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6 St. Michael's Arcade, built in 1910, is part of a larger precinct owned by the Grosvenor family. It also connects to the adjacent Rows.

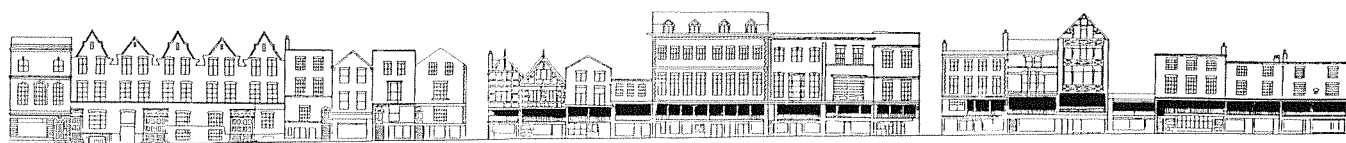
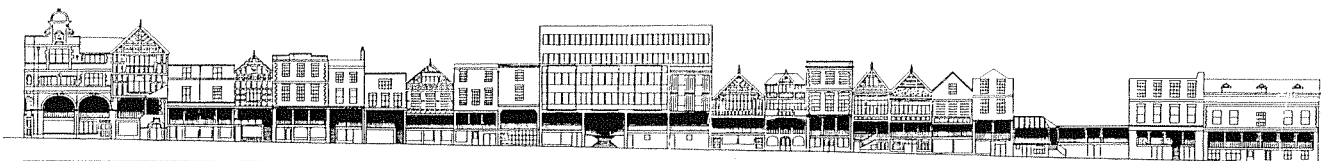
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consultants and the national government, that has coordinated so much positive effort over the last decade.

Characteristics of the Rows

The Rows are public right-of-ways through private property. The individual owners are required to maintain the passageways, and if they fail to do so, the city is empowered to intercede and seek compensation for repairs. Ownership parcels range from that of a small shop on one level to the sizable holdings of the Grosvenor family. Some owners have acquired property at one level across several buildings; others have assembled space vertically. The organization of the Rows has facilitated this complex ownership pattern, which in turn has contributed to the area's intimate scale. From building to building, there are frequent changes in surface materials, slight shifts in floor levels, and different displays that cumulatively contribute to the district's individuality and character.

The access points to the Rows are generally gracious and clearly announced architecturally by protruding bays and rhythm changes in column spacing. Several strategic entrances are at corners, even though at such locations they occupy potentially the most valuable retail space. The Rows, however, are not always continuous. Pedestrians are forced to move down and then up again after traversing short stretches. Since the Rows are approximately seven feet above street grade, the height



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differential is not as serious an obstacle as more recent American skywalks, which may be thirty feet above the ground. The city, however, recognizes this inconvenience and plans to unify more of the Rows by bridging across short streets.

Commercial Aspects

The retail district of Chester clustered around the Rows is commercially very successful, enjoying the highest volume of trade for any city in Great Britain with

a population under 100,000.¹⁴ There are approximately 90,000 people living in Chester, but its commercial catchment extends far beyond and into North Wales. Clearly, Chester's commercial success is attributable in part to its unique circulation system and architectural setting. The tiered shops contribute an intensity and intimacy to one's shopping experience. One can easily compare objects, sometimes by standing at Rows level and viewing displays in the two levels of shops opposite. The sequential variety of spaces,

7 The individual character of separate buildings threaded by the public gallery of the Rows is particularly evident in these elevations. Drawings prepared by Donald W. Insall and Associates, conservation consultants to the City of Chester.



8 An access to the Rows is prominently located and announced architecturally at the Cross. Source: *Chester: A Study in Conservation* (British Crown copyright). Reproduced with the permission of the Controller of Her Britannic Majesty's Stationery Office.

levels, and outlooks are enjoyable experiences, encouraging one to explore further. With the exception of the Grosvenor Precinct, the Rows are public space, and there are spatial and architectural clues to remind one of this. For example, churches are located throughout the central area, which is virtually unheard of in American shopping centers and, indeed, rare in many American downtown retail districts.

The two pedestrian levels are complementary rather than redundant. Obviously, the lower level is most accessible. Since it is open to the sky, it is most enjoyable in sunny weather. The Rows, being more enclosed and protected, offer convenient shelter from intermittent rain and wind. There is a variety of retail space, from small shops to department stores.¹⁵ Some of the larger stores extend through several floors with access from both circulation levels. Food stores have gravitated to the lower level, and specialty retail such as jewelry, clothing, and leather goods stores have generally collected along the Rows galleries. Speciality retail, in fact, is proving to be the district's most successful commercial activity. Chester has long had a reputation for the high quality of its shops. The craftsmanship, scale, and refinement exhibited in the architecture of the city is an appropriate environment in which to display high quality goods.

Commercial rents traditionally have been highest in the Eastgate section and Grosvenor Precinct, where the Rows are more continuous, generously sized, and pedestrian-

use intensive. The Eastgate itself has been the main entrance to the town center since the Roman period, as this was the road to London and York. Beyond Eastgate, outside the walls, in the area occupied appropriately by the old Roman markets, new development for consumer retail has recently been built in floor area sizes that can no longer be conveniently accommodated within the walls. The actual rents range from a high of £45/square foot/year in the Eastgate section to a low of £5 in the Watergate section, the west end of the same street.¹⁶ The rent differential between Rows level and street level of a particular building is negligible, reflecting the balanced though dissimilar amenities of the two commercial levels.

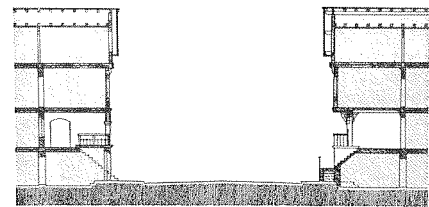


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The Rows solve a recurring problem of retail arcades: how to display merchandise adequately when stores are recessed from the building front. In the Rows there is a three-foot wide band of space along the edge of the balcony between the walkway and street space. It is raised approximately one foot to permit entry height clearance to the stores underneath. Historically, merchants displayed goods in these bands of space. Over the years the casual displays became formalized as glass show cases. Today, they occupy only a part of this strip, allowing natural light into the walkway and views out to the street. In addition to informing shoppers of available merchandise, they also modulate the space of the passageway and provide illumination for the walkway at night.

Urban Design Qualities

Chester's elevated walkway system is a thread that elegantly sews the town together. It has an elaborate weave, permitting one to move graciously along the seams and around the fringe of the central city. It interlaces the town in a way that is informative but not intrusive. As one walks through the galleries and around the walls, one sees the activities, social groups, and historical and geographical imperatives that shaped this city. For example, from the southern walls one may view the hinterland, sense the region's geography, and begin to understand the compulsions of the original settlers who located their camp on a hill wrapped by a river. Further to the northeast, one may glimpse office buildings and the town clock, the



10

9 A band of show cases within the Rows edges one side, and views of the city beyond are framed architecturally.

10 The intimate scale of the Rows is derived from the section as well as elevation of the streets.



11

“Roman Garden” archaeological display, the cathedral in its parklike setting, and boating activities on the Union Canal. To the north one may view workers’ housing and industrial installations and to the west the Roodee, which is a racecourse and playing field.

The walkway system is also versatile. It bridges streets, provides overlooks, connects to parking garages, and at the Roodee tiers down into a stadium. That commercial activities are connected to these other experiences in a graceful and artful way enhances one’s shopping obligations and elevates them into cultural occasions.

With this variety there is also overall structure and clarity to

the elevated walkway system, largely attributable to the Roman cruciform plan, which the Rows follow, and to the encircling town wall that it incorporated. Moreover, there are sequential themes developed as one moves from the peripheral town wall to the Cross at the center. One has the clear sense of moving from open, exposed positions along the wall to protected space at the center. Since the wall promenade is at a higher elevation than the Rows, one descends from the wall down to the Rows, further contributing to a sense of protection. At the center one is enclosed within the shelter of the Rows, the confines of the street space, the height of the town wall, and the barrier of encircling waterways. There are also similarities and contrasts between

11 Distant views of the River Dee and surrounding countryside can be enjoyed from the southern section of the town wall promenade.

the types of views one experiences within the Rows and from the town wall. In the Rows there are immediate, intimate views contained by the continuous line of shops on one side. On the other side there are more open views to the street beyond. From the promenade along the town wall views to the townside are generally more confined, while outlooks to the country on the other side are expansive.

Within the Rows there is a rich hierarchical rhythm resulting from periodic entry stairs between street and Rows level, expression of buildings as units, column spacings, display cases, and store signs. The Rows offer wonderful vantage points to view the street scene below, appreciate the well-crafted buildings opposite and the overall street silhouette, usually terminated by a church tower and the town wall bridging the street. When viewed from below or across the street, the bays of the Rows provide appropriate frames in which clusters of people may gather. Moreover, because of the richness and delicacy of detail in railings, building facades, and ceilings, the Rows appear active even at times when there are few people in them.

Chester, with its enviable qualities, is not without problems. Early in the nineteenth century, Cestrians began a residential exodus to the outlying areas that has not been reversed. The result is a large amount of unoccupied upper floor space in the city center that is proving to be an intractable

problem.¹⁷ Approximately 25 percent of the floors above Rows level are partially or completely unoccupied.¹⁸ It is difficult to gain access to the upper floors of some buildings because of awkward interior organization, and it is also difficult to assemble large uninterrupted quantities of space for contemporary uses such as offices. Because of the extensive vacancies, too many of the buildings are slowly deteriorating through neglect, which is exacerbated by water damage caused by leakage through water troughs located over party walls.¹⁹ With few people living in the central area, the downtown is inactive at night. It is also difficult to service, although the Grosvenor Precinct has succeeded in overcoming this problem by installing an underground delivery area. Additional opportunities for service access are from the rear of other buildings.

Conclusion

The development of Chester's elevated walkway system represents the cumulative refinement of an eloquent urban design language. The walkway system has responded to a variety of historical issues and continues to address contemporary problems. It is safe, comfortable, and usually convenient. It possesses an overall structure that allows it to be easily understood, and, at the same time, it is intricate and intriguing to explore. It is a path of revelation through the city, educating users about the customs of the people and the nature of the place. It is as beautiful to look out

from as it is to look at and is coordinated with the architecture of the city to a degree not yet realized in our contemporary developments. Moreover, the civic nature of these public thoroughfares are maintained and even celebrated. These clearly are qualities for other cities to pursue in new developments.

In the last twenty-five years elevated walkways have been built as joint public/private ventures in the centers of American cities such as Minneapolis, St. Paul, Baltimore, Cincinnati, and Houston. Generally, they have been viewed as successful. In some cases, these walkways have been credited with significantly stabilizing and reviving faltering downtown economies. Elevated walkways, however, are appropriate only under certain conditions. They should be considered for central areas that cannot grow laterally because they are already too extended or because there are physical, historical, or land use boundaries that restrict expansion. Elevated walkways are also particularly appropriate for areas in which through traffic severs major pedestrian paths and for cities with uncomfortable climates.

When linked with parking garages and mass transit stops, provided with clear entrances, arranged in the direction of pedestrian traffic flow, sited to take advantage of sloping topography and weather conditioned, elevated walkways have been enthusiastically adopted by downtown workers, shoppers, and visitors. Relative to Chester,



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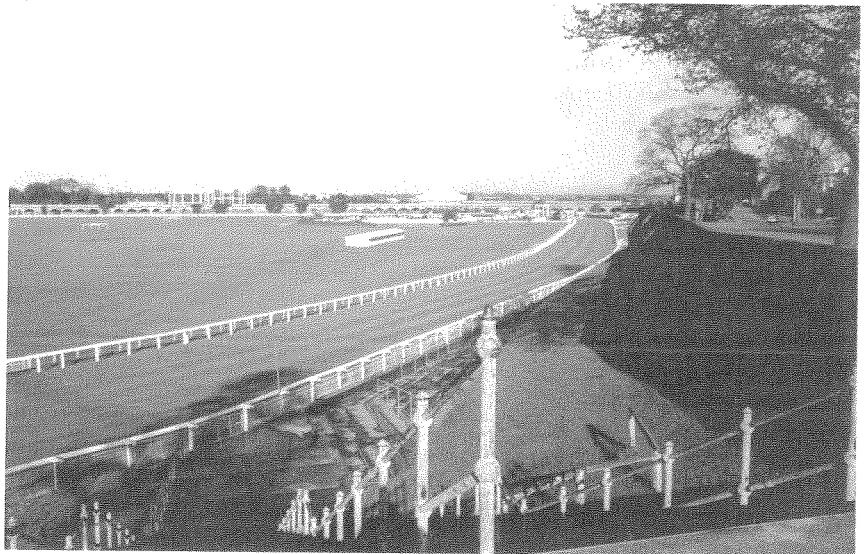


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12 View along town wall at Eastgate of offices, upper level shop windows, and town clock.

13 The “Roman Garden,” an archaeological repository of Chester’s past, is adjacent to the town wall.

14 A racecourse, bounded on one side by the town wall promenade, fills a plain where the River Dee meandered before it changed course.



14

these systems have been adapted to larger scales of activity, different and often more difficult cultural, economic, and technical problems, and in the case of northern cities, more severe climates. Moreover, these recent networks have largely been retrofitted onto existing buildings that were not originally designed to accommodate upper level walkways. The design options have thus been severely restricted.

Because of the different conditions underlying contemporary systems and that of Chester, it is, in a sense, unfair to press comparisons too insistently, but by making comparisons, we may gain insights into the use of elevated walkways. The skywalks of Minneapolis and St. Paul represent one prevalent type of recent development. These pedestrian routes bridge streets at midblock locations and penetrate into privately owned buildings rather than paralleling the public streets and sidewalks below. Understandably, by doing so they reduce exposure of the walkway to the harsh winter climates and maximize both walkway edges for commercial use. Yet, pedestrians on these skywalks are, compared to those of Chester, deprived of orientation to and perception of the city through which they move. Moreover, the skywalks are also privately policed, which tends to exclude certain otherwise acceptable types of public behavior. The skywalks have extensive but controlled hours of operation, which again reminds people that they are passing through private property.



15

15 Downtown Minneapolis skywalks bridge streets at midblock locations and penetrate through buildings rather than edge the streets, as they do in Chester.

The elevated walkways in downtown Baltimore demonstrate another approach. These walkways are generally detached from buildings and are treated more as architectural elements to shape space. They generally are not edged with activities or developed as social space but rather serve as channels through which people move from one point to another. The elevated walkways do not complement street activity, often being far from the street or high above it.

Even recent American shopping centers have similarities in form with the Rows of Chester. Many have two layers of circulation and stores, but, unlike the Rows of Chester, they are invariably disconnected from surrounding activity by extensive parking lots. The newer shopping centers being built in city and even suburban centers offer greater promise. Since these complexes are usually controlled by a single developer, they could approach Chester's integration between circulation and buildings patterns and sympathetically connect a complex to surrounding areas. Possibly, through the provision of long-term leases or buyout options for shopkeepers, the spontaneity and individualization demonstrated at Chester could be incorporated.

The systematic yet eccentric pedestrian network of Chester provides a rich and rewarding historical vantage point from which to view contemporary efforts. By following its example in future development, we can build elevated

walkways that not only function as channels of movement but inform us as to the extent and character of a city's activities and thus orient us to the overall public realm.

NOTES

- 1 Nikolaus Pevsner and Edward Hubbard, *Cheshire*, The Buildings of England Series (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 133.
- 2 David Lloyd, "A Legacy of Roman Planning, Chester I," *Country Life* (January 3, 1963), p. 6.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 4 For a discussion of theories on the origins of the Rows, see Brian Harris, *Chester*, Bartholomew City Guides, (Edinburgh and London: John Bartholomew and Son, 1979), pp. 20–21; P. H. Lawson and J. T. Smith, "The Rows of Chester: Two Interpretations," *Journal of the Chester and North Wales Architectural, Archaeological and Historical Society* 45 (Chester: G. R. Griffith, 1958), pp. 1–42; and Donald W. Insall, *Conservation in Action: Chester's Bridgegate* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1982), p. 23.
- 5 Letter to the author, September 26, 1983, from S. R. Williams, Chester County Planning Department.
- 6 Harris, *Chester*, p. 17.
- 7 David Lloyd, "An English Carcassonne, Chester II," *Country Life* (January 10, 1963), pp. 68–69.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 71.
- 9 Harris, pp. 30–31.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 23, 31.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- 12 Conversation between author and Oliver Bott, Chester County Conservation Group, September 29, 1982.
- 13 Donald W. Insall, *Chester, A Study in Conservation* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1968), p. 17a.
- 14 Conversation between author and G. Cross, Chester City Council Office, September 29, 1982.
- 15 There are 1,140,000 net square feet of commercial space in central Chester. Letter to the author from G. Cross,

Chester City Council office, October 14, 1983.

- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 There are currently 500,000 square feet of vacant, grossly underused floor space in the upper floors. *Ibid.*
- 18 Insall, *Conservation in Action*, p. 122.
- 19 *Ibid.*