

ATMOSPHERIC REPORT FOR CONGLETON

Presented by Simon Brown

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Simon Brown was a design engineer before taking up oriental medicine. He went on to be the director of London’s Community Health Foundation that provided a huge range of courses focussed on natural health. He ran the UKs first feng shui courses in 1989.

Simon worked with British Airways on the design of their successful Waterside headquarters for three thousand five hundred staff. This building became a gold standard of new working practices and showed how a building could support a dramatic change in attitude and productivity. He also worked with The Body Shop for many years helping to bring their new shop design to a successful conclusion before it was rolled out to eight hundred stores.

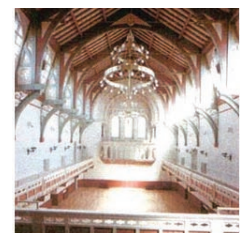
Simon has worked on many airport projects including those in Venice, Paris and Turino. A recent low cost terminal project in Boa Vista was rated as one of the world’s most beautiful airports in passenger surveys.



TERMS OF THIS REPORT

Atmosphere – We perceive this as the feeling of place or the way we feel in a place. In feng shui theory the atmosphere has an influence on our emotions so a certain building or street could have the kind of atmosphere that helps people feel relaxed and content. For example the town hall, main room has an uplifting atmosphere.

Feng Shui Theory is used within the concept of this Atmospheric survey.



Report sponsor

Congletonian Dawn Gibbins MBE is founder of The Yin Crowd who sponsored this report with the aim to make Congleton a happy, healthy and prosperous town.

ATMOSPHERIC SURVEY

There are many positive features for the town. These include the river, park, architecture of the town hall and other buildings, canal, background vista of the cloud, flowers in summer and Astbury Mere Country Park. The enthusiasm of the council, business people and supporters was impressive. The fingers of countryside that extend deep into the town give it a natural, rural atmosphere. It is pleasant to be able to drive into the town without driving through any industrial estates. Congleton has a friendly, down to earth, honest feel to it that seems in harmony with the surrounding nature and its considerable history.



The following are a list of what I consider to be potential issues for Congleton.

A Mountbatten Way cuts through between the town centre and the park, river and leisure area. This road is difficult to cross and has a hard, industrial, municipal feel to it. As someone driving through Congleton, there is nothing to entice me to stop and explore the town. The decaying mill, Morrisons, back of the library and police station combine to create a poor visual impression of Congleton and might even put drivers off visiting. The atmosphere here felt cold, hard, fast and busy.



B The market square has lacks a vibrant atmosphere. This is likely to be because it is sunk into pit below the street level and entrance to Morrisons. In addition the stalls are arranged so that there is no real market atmosphere. Rather than having a view of all the stalls along with the retail outlets around, the stalls back onto buildings that obscure any view and create a series of small unappealing alleyways. The area felt bare, cold, hard, unfriendly and uninteresting.



C The bus station provides a poor first impression of Congleton to anyone arriving by bus. A large brick wall that is part of Morrisons, the library and car park surround the area. The only glimpse of something attractive is the covered walkway, Capital Walk, leading to the High Street.



D The two derelict mills that are seen travelling along Mountbatten Way give a somewhat sad, run down image to the town. All drivers that use the busy roads passing through the town will see the derelict mills and they contribute to the general impression of Congleton.



E The shops in Bridge Street start closing at 5pm and putting up shutters. There did not seem to be much of a nightlife or evening economy. I did not see many restaurants. The area had a functional feel whilst seeming slightly empty and lifeless compared to some busy town high streets.



F The railway station is too far from the town centre for a convenient walk and has no appeal whatsoever for passengers travelling through Congleton station. The station buildings create a distinctly off putting and inaccurate image of Congleton. The station had an atmosphere that felt uncared for, stark and austere.



G The parking policy favours long-term parking for commuters but may deter short-term parking for shoppers. This could be frustrating for shoppers who just want to do some quick shopping in the town.

H I noticed a lack of vegetation in the town, which contributed to the slightly bare atmosphere of the streets.

I There is currently no obvious incentive to get from the canal to the town centre and nothing to illustrate the gems inside the town.

J Having spent two days in Congleton and talked to many people it would be difficult to think of one sentence that sums the town up. It has attractive parts, some of the independent shops are interesting, the park is beautiful but I would suggest the town does not have a memorable feature or theme. This is important as it would help if every Congleton visitor felt inspired to tell their friends about the town. This is most likely to happen when the town has a particular something that can be summed up in one sentence.

INITIAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 I would recommend changing Mountbatten Way to include a hedge, trees and bushes. Ideally the bushes would flower. This will soften the feel of the area and give it a greener atmosphere. The bushes could be sculpted into the shape of a bear to emphasise the Bear Town history.

You could think of every driver and passenger that passes along Mountbatten Way as being a potential customer. This would require thinking through every step of how to inform drivers of what is available in Congleton town centre. I suggest you would include clear information on how to park, the shops, restaurants and cafes. Posters and pictures of the town hall, shops and park would highlight the positive features of the town.

To connect the town centre to the park I suggest building a foot and cycle bridge across Mountbatten way. To make this convenient the bridge would ideally start from the high ground somewhere near the new market square and Morrison’s entrance. This would be an opportunity to add an interesting feature to the town. I would recommend that the bridge itself is made from interesting materials and features an interesting design that can be something of a landmark and icon for Congleton.

- 2 I would recommend using the existing market site as a car park and bring the market up to the same level as the high street. Personally I would look to give the new town square a distinct and attractive atmosphere. This would be an opportunity to give the town its memorable feature and bring people in from outside the town. The traditional successful market square design was to create an open square surrounded by retail units. The centre of the square would then be filled with stalls. The stalls would not be so high as to obscure people’s line of vision across the square. This way anyone standing at any point within the square will be able to see all the retail units and stalls.



To make the market square memorable and something of a talking point I would consider styling it in the image of Little Moreton Hall. Wood frames, white plaster and thatched roofs would help give the area a distinct theme. The square could be cobbled with banners, flags and ribbons providing colour.



I would suggest the square is designed so it can be used most of the week by attracting a variety of traders. For example one day a vegetable market, another fabrics, then clothing, a toy fair, antiques, food festival and so on. I think to would help the atmosphere to include at least one café in this area with a space for tables and chairs outside. The square would ideally be exposed to sunlight.

- 3 I recommend you explore ways in which various positive images from Congleton could be put onto the Morrison’s brick wall that faces the bus terminal. Even a huge vine growing over the brick wall would greatly help the atmosphere here. It would help to grow trees, bushes and any other vegetation in the bus station area, in front of the library and around the car parks. It would help to make clear signs to the market square and town centre. Directing people through Capitol Walk would help the shops and café situated there.



- 4** The derelict mill on Mountbatten Way can be viewed as a huge advertising opportunity. The exterior walls could be draped in fabric with images of Congleton or the logos of different shops in the town. This could inspire drivers to visit the town with the added benefit of turning an eye sore into something interesting. The art of trompe l’oeil could be used to decorate the building if it is likely to remain derelict. If nothing else I would at least tie a huge red ribbon around the building to make it a little more uplifting to look at.



- 5** Better lighting and CCTV might help improve security in the High Street and Bridge Street reducing the need for shutters. If shutters need to be retained it would help to make them look as attractive as possible. Using the same art of trompe l’oeil would be good on the shutters so that they illustrate shops full of people.

A strong retailers association of local shopkeepers might be able to explore ways to work together to bring in more customers. Perhaps this could be started under the current and successful local Chamber of Commerce. It might be that staying open later, having table and chairs outside the cafés in Bridge Street, creating a shop plan listing all the retailers in the town, having mutual standards of quality for the shop front appearances, window boxes with flowers and better lighting will improve the atmosphere and trade.

Changing Bridge Street to cobbles would help create an impression that is more in keeping with the architecture of some of the older buildings.

- 6** The grey colour of the train station along with the plain, bunker style architecture is a disincentive to visit Congleton. If the buildings cannot be rebuilt it would help to use a different colour, like maroon, to create a more inspiring look.



Flowering plants along the platform and around the station buildings would help. Large posters of Astbury Mere Country Park, the town hall, Congleton streets, the canal along with the park and river would encourage passengers to consider visiting the town.

It would make sense to offer a public shuttle bus service from the town centre to the station so that people using the line could easily visit the town.

- 7** I would suggest that the car park close to the library is set up so that free parking is limited to two hours. This would give shoppers sufficient time to make purchases whilst deterring people from using the car park all day and denying spaces for shoppers. It may be that strategic half hour and one hour parking bays could be created to allow people to make quick shopping trips into the town. This policy of free two hour parking for shoppers could be signed along Mountbatten Way to encourage people passing through to stop in Congleton.

- 8** I recommend you explore sites in the town to increase the vegetation and in particular grow more trees. This can add colour, life and beauty to the town centre.



9 Signs and posters would help encourage people using the canal to come into the Congleton town centre. If there is a bus service to the town centre I suggest the timetable is posted on the canal at potential mooring points.

10 To bring people into Congleton I recommend you explore running a variety of events and festivals. The town hall provides an attractive and memorable facility to hold indoor events that could be promoted throughout the area. If these facilities could be made available at very reasonable costs they will potentially bring in people for exhibitions and events such as, yoga, tai chi, exercise classes, arts and crafts, music, dance classes, model railway exhibitions, designer clothing sales and antiques fairs.

11 I think you have many traditional themes to draw on for creating an image for Congleton. There is the bear, ribbons and fabrics. The bear theme could be used throughout the town to strengthen that identity. It may be that in conjunction with Berisford's the town could feature ribbons in various public spaces. This would add a colourful, festive atmosphere to the town and again help make it memorable to the visitor. Colourful fabric banners would be another way to add colour whilst drawing on this mill town's roots.



You might commission an unusual work of art for a busy public place to give the town a point of interest. This could be combined with a moving water feature to make it more dynamic. My initial thought would be a moving water wheel, picking up on the mill town history. The feature could be slightly abstract so it is not too obvious. In the future the memorable feature could be the Tudor market square or interesting bridge to the park.



Once the new themes have been implemented it would help to have a campaign to promote the town using posters, the internet and brochures. It may be that you could work in partnership with the rail operator and bus companies to promote the new features in places like Manchester.

CONCLUSION

Like any other town Congleton is in competition with the surrounding towns and out of town retail parks for shoppers and tourists. At the same time the town needs to be a space that improves the quality of life for its residents and people working there.

I would recommend that whatever is done as part of the regeneration scheme aims to be something the residents can feel proud of and will attract new people into the town. This does not necessarily need to cost more but does need original, creative and inspired design from the outset.

The clearer everyone is on what the town's image will be the easier it is to create a consistent design brief. All this will contribute to making the Atmosphere of Congleton such that it naturally feels like a happy and successful place to live and work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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This report was commissioned by Dawn Gibbins MBE
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