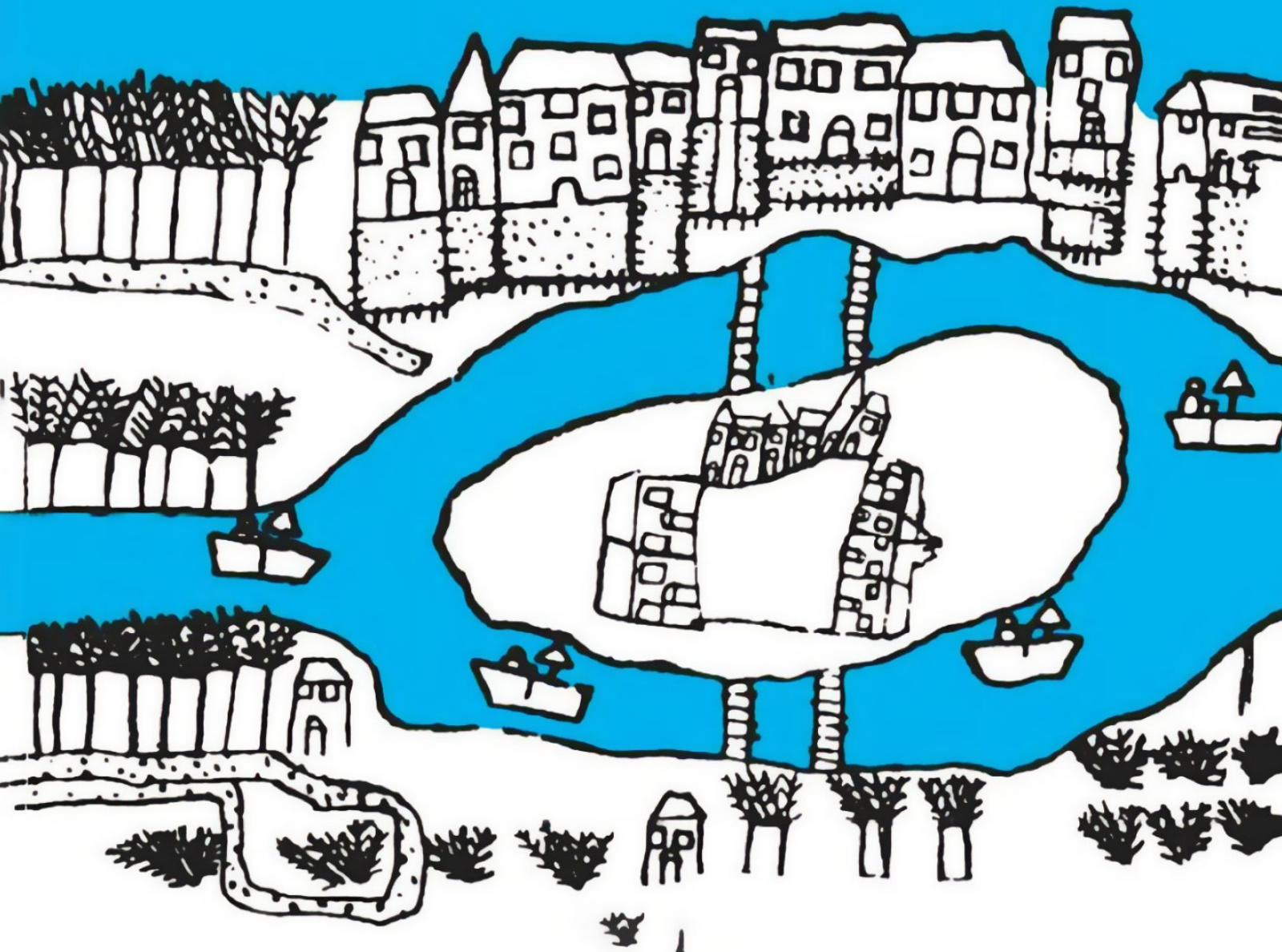


Kevin Lynch:

THE
IMAGE
OF
THE
CITY



THE IMAGE OF THE CITY

Kevin Lynch

What does the city's form actually mean to the people who live there? What can the city planner do to make the city's image more vivid and memorable to the city dweller? To answer these questions, Mr. Lynch, supported by studies of Los Angeles, Boston, and Jersey City, formulates a new criterion — *imageability* — and shows its potential value as a guide for the building and rebuilding of cities.

The wide scope of this study leads to an original and vital method for the evaluation of city form. The architect, the planner, and certainly the city dweller will all want to read this book.

What the reviewers have said:

". . . Kevin Lynch has come up with a readable, tautly organized, authoritative volume that may prove as important to city building as Camillo Sitte's *The Art of Building Cities*." — *Architectural Forum*

"City planners and urban designers everywhere will be taking account of his work for years to come . . . The importance of this book in the literature of urbanism is obvious. . . we have lacked a theory of the city's visual perception based on objective criteria. For some strange reason, in the period dating from the late 19th Century in Germany and lasting until Lynch's efforts . . . there was no experimentation in the matter of how cities are perceived. All of us can be grateful for the resumption of this line of thought. The impact of this volume should be enormous." — Leonard K. Eaton, *Progressive Architecture*

"This small and readable book makes one of the most important modern contributions to large-scale design theory . . . To understand Lynch's audacity, one must go back to 1953, the year when he began his studies in perception with a travel period in Italy. This was several years before all the 'urban design' conferences, before the coining of the phrase, and at a time when respectable planners were concerned with anything but the exploration of urban form. It took a rebellious young teacher . . . fired by the inspiration of F. L. Wright (his sometime mentor), to turn the tables on thirty years of planners' neglect." — David A. Crane, *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*

Kevin Lynch

The Image of the City



The M.I.T. Press

*Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England*



PUBLICATION OF THE JOINT CENTER FOR URBAN STUDIES

This book is one of a series published under the auspices of the Joint Center for Urban Studies, a cooperative venture of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University. The Joint Center was founded in 1959 to organize and encourage research on urban and regional problems. Participants have included scholars from the fields of anthropology, architecture, business, city planning, economics, education, engineering, history, law, philosophy, political science, and sociology.

The findings and conclusions of this book are, as with all Joint Center publications, solely the responsibility of the author.

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Twentieth Printtime. 1990

ISBN 0 262 12004 6 (hardcover)
ISBN 0 262 62001 4 (paperback)

Library of Congress Catalog Card No: 60-7362

Printed in the United States of America

PREFACE

This book is about the look of cities, and whether this look is of any importance, and whether it can be changed. The urban landscape, among its many roles, is also something to be seen, to be remembered, and to delight in. Giving visual form to the city is a special kind of design problem, and a rather new one at that.

In the course of examining this new problem, the book looks at three American cities: Boston, Jersey City, and Los Angeles. It suggests a method whereby we might begin to deal with visual form at the urban scale, and offers some first principles of city design.

The work that lies behind this study was done under the direction of Professor Gyorgy Kepes and myself at the Center for Urban and Regional Studies of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. It was generously supported over several years by funds from the Rockefeller Foundation. The book itself is being published as one of a series of volumes of the Joint Center for Urban Studies of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University, an agency which has grown out of the urban research activities of these two institutions.

As in any intellectual work, the content derives from many sources, difficult to trace. Several research associates contributed directly to the development of this study: David Crane, Bernard

Frieden, William Alonso, Frank Hotchkiss, Richard Dober, Mary Ellen Peters (now Mrs. Alonso). I am very grateful to them all.

One name should be on the title page with my own, if only he would thereby not be made responsible for the shortcomings of the book. That name is Gyorgy Kepes. The detailed development and concrete studies are my own, but the underlying concepts were generated in many exchanges with Professor Kepes. I would be at a loss to disentangle my ideas from his. For me these have been good years of association.

KEVIN LYNCH

MLT.
December, 1959

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I.

THE IMAGE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Looking at cities can give a special pleasure, however commonplace the sight may be. Like a piece of architecture, the city is a construction in space, but one of vast scale, a thing perceived only in the course of long spans of time. City design is therefore a temporal art, but it can rarely use the controlled and limited sequences of other temporal arts like music. On different occasions and for different people, the sequences are reversed, interrupted, abandoned, cut across. It is seen in all lights and all weathers.

At every instant, there is more than the eye can see, more than the ear can hear, a setting or a view waiting to be explored. Nothing is experienced by itself, but always in relation to its surroundings, the sequences of events leading up to it, the memory of past experiences. Washington Street set in a farmer's field might look like the shopping street in the heart of Boston, and yet it would seem utterly different. Every citizen has had long associations with some part of his city, and his image is soaked in memories and meanings.

Moving elements in a city, and in particular the people and their activities, are as important as the stationary physical parts. We are not simply observers of this spectacle, but are ourselves a part of it, on the stage with the other participants. Most often, our perception of the city is not sustained, but rather partial, fragmentary, mixed with other concerns. Nearly every sense is in operation, and the image is the composite of them all.

Nor only is the city an object which is perceived (and perhaps enjoyed) by millions of people of widely diverse class and character, but it is the product of many builders who are constantly modifying the structure for reasons of their own. While it may be stable in general outlines for some time, it is ever changing in detail. Only partial control can be exercised over its growth and form. There is no final result, only a continuous succession of phases. No wonder, then, that the art of shaping cities for sensuous enjoyment is an act quite separate from architecture or music or literature. It may learn a great deal from these other arts, but it cannot imitate them.

A beautiful and delightful city environment is an oddity, some would say an impossibility. Not one American city larger than a village is of consistently fine quality, although a few towns have some pleasant fragments. It is hardly surprising, then, that most Americans have little idea of what it can mean to live in such an environment. They are clear enough about the ugliness of the world they live in, and they are quite vocal about the dirt, the smoke, the heat, and the congestion, the chaos and yet the monotony of it. But they are hardly aware of the potential value of harmonious surroundings, a world which they may have briefly glimpsed only as tourists or as escaped vacationers. They can have little sense of what a setting can mean in terms of daily delight, or as a continuous anchor for their lives, or as an extension of the meaningfulness and richness of the world.

Legibility

This book will consider the visual quality of the American city by studying the mental image of that city which is held by its citizens. It will concentrate especially on one particular visual quality: the apparent clarity or "Legibility" of the cityscape. By this we mean the ease with which its parts can be recognized

and can be organized into a coherent pattern/Just as this printed page, if it is legible, can be visually grasped as a related pattern of recognizable symbols, so a legible city would be one whose districts or landmarks or pathways are easily identifiable and are easily grouped into an over-all pattern.

This book will assert that legibility is crucial in the city setting, will analyze it in some detail, and will try to show how this concept might be used today in rebuilding our cities. As will quickly become apparent to the reader, this study is a preliminary exploration, a first word not a last word, an attempt to capture ideas and to suggest how they might be developed and tested. Its tone will be speculative and perhaps a little irresponsible: at once tentative and presumptuous. This first chapter will develop some of the basic ideas; later chapters will apply them to several American cities and discuss their consequences for urban design.

Although clarity or legibility is by no means the only important property of a beautiful city, it is of special importance when considering environments at the urban scale of size, time, and complexity. To understand this, we must consider not just the city as a thing in itself, but the city being perceived by its inhabitants.

Structuring and identifying the environment is a vital ability among all mobile animals. Many kinds of cues are used: the visual sensations of color, shape, motion, or polarization of light, as well as other senses such as smell, sound, touch, kinesthesia, sense of gravity, and perhaps of electric or magnetic fields. These techniques of orientation, from the polar flight of a tern to the path-finding of a limpet over the micro-topography of a rock, are described and their importance underscored in an extensive literature.'10-20-31-59' Psychologists have also studied this ability in man, although rather sketchily or under limited laboratory conditions.'1-5-8-12-37-63-65-76-81' Despite a few remaining puzzles, it now seems unlikely that there is any mystic "instinct" of way-finding. Rather there is a consistent use and organization of definite sensory cues from the external environment. This organization is fundamental to the efficiency and to the very survival of free-moving life.





orientation, of never coming out. The surprise must occur in an over-all framework; the confusions must be small regions in a visible whole. Furthermore, the labyrinth or mystery must in itself have some form that can be explored and in time be apprehended. Complete chaos without hint of connection is never pleasurable.

These points are further illustrated in Appendix A

But these second thoughts point to an important qualification. The observer himself should play an active role in perceiving the world and have a creative part in developing his image. He should have the power to change that image to fit changing needs. An environment which is ordered in precise and final detail may inhibit new patterns of activity. A landscape whose every rock tells a story may make difficult the creation of fresh stories. Although this may not seem to be a critical issue in our present urban chaos, yet it indicates that what we seek is not a final but an open-ended order, capable of continuous further development.

Building the Image

Environmental images are the result of a two-way process between the observer and his environment. The environment suggests distinctions and relations, and the observer—with great adaptability and in the light of his own purposes—selects, organizes, and endows with meaning what he sees. The image so developed now limits and emphasizes what is seen, while the image itself is being tested against the filtered perceptual input in a constant interacting process. Thus the image of a given reality may vary significantly between different observers.

The coherence of the image may arise in several ways. There may be little in the real object that is ordered or remarkable, and yet its mental picture has gained identity and organization through long familiarity. One man may find objects easily on what seems to anyone else to be a totally disordered work table. Alternatively, an object seen for the first time may be identified and related not because it is individually familiar but because it conforms to a stereotype already constructed by the observer. An American can always spot the corner drugstore, however indistinguishable it might be to a Bushman. Again, a new object

may seem to have strong structure or identity because of striking physical features which suggest or impose their own pattern. Thus the sea or a great mountain can rivet the attention of one coming from the flat plains of the interior, even if he is so young or so parochial as to have no name for these great phenomena.

As manipulators of the physical environment, city planners are primarily interested in the external agent in the interaction which produces the environmental image. Different environments resist or facilitate the process of image-making. Any given form, a fine vase or a lump of clay, will have a high or a low probability of evoking a strong image among various observers. Presumably this probability can be stated with greater and greater precision as the observers are grouped in more and more homogeneous classes of age, sex, culture, occupation, temperament, or familiarity. Each individual creates and bears his own image, but there seems to be substantial agreement among members of the same group. It is these group images, exhibiting consensus among significant numbers, that interest city planners who aspire to model an environment that will be used by many people.

Therefore this study will tend to pass over individual differences, interesting as they might be to a psychologist. The first order of business will be what might be called the "public images," the common mental pictures carried by large numbers of a city's inhabitants: areas of agreement which might be expected to appear in the interaction of a single physical reality, a common culture, and a basic physiological nature.

The systems of orientation which have been used vary widely throughout the world, changing from culture to culture, and from landscape to landscape. Appendix A gives examples of many of them: the abstract and fixed directional systems, the moving systems, and those that are directed to the person, the home, or the sea. The world may be organized around a set of focal points, or be broken into named regions, or be linked by remembered routes. Varied as these methods are, and inexhaustible as seem to be the potential clues which a man may pick out to differentiate his world, they cast interesting side-lights on the means that we use today to locate ourselves in our own city world. For the

most part these examples seem to echo, curiously enough, the formal types of image elements into which we can conveniently divide the city image: path, landmark, edge, node, and district. These elements will be defined and discussed in Chapter 3.

Structure and Identity

An environmental image may be analyzed into three components: identity, structure, and meaning. It is useful to abstract these for analysis, if it is remembered that in reality they always appear together. A workable image requires first the identification of an object, which implies its distinction from other things, its recognition as a separable entity. This is called identity, not in the sense of equality with something else, but with the meaning of individuality or oneness. Second, the image must include the spatial or pattern relation of the object to the observer and to other objects. Finally, this object must have some meaning for the observer, whether practical or emotional. Meaning is also a relation, but quite a different one from spatial or pattern relation.

Thus an image useful for making an exit requires the recognition of a door as a distinct entity, of its spatial relation to the observer, and its meaning as a hole for getting out. These are not truly separable. The visual recognition of a door is matted together with its meaning as a door. It is possible, however, to analyze the door in terms of its identity of form and clarity of position, considered as if they were prior to its meaning,

Such an analytic feat might be pointless in the study of a door, but not in the study of the urban environment. To begin with, the question of meaning in the city is a complicated one. Group images of meaning are less likely to be consistent at this level than are the perceptions of entity and relationship. Meaning, moreover, is not so easily influenced by physical manipulation as are these other two components. If it is our purpose to build cities for the enjoyment of vast numbers of people of widely diverse background—and cities which will also be adaptable to future purposes—we may even be wise to concentrate on the physical clarity of the image and to allow meaning to develop without our direct guidance. The image of the Manhattan sky-

line may stand for vitality, power, decadence, mystery, congestion, greatness, or what you will, but in each case that sharp picture crystallizes and reinforces the meaning. So various are the individual meanings of a city, even while its form may be easily communicable, that it appears possible to separate meaning from form, at least in the early stages of analysis. This study will therefore concentrate on the identity and structure of city images.

If an image is to have value for orientation in the living space, it must have several qualities. It must be sufficient, true in a pragmatic sense, allowing the individual to operate within his environment to the extent desired. The map, whether exact or not, must be good enough to get one home. It must be sufficiently clear and well integrated to be economical of mental effort: the map must be readable. It should be safe, with a surplus of clues so that alternative actions are possible and the risk of failure is not too high. If a blinking light is the only sign for a critical turn, a power failure may cause disaster. The image should preferably be open-ended, adaptable to change, allowing the individual to continue to investigate and organize reality: there should be blank spaces where he can extend the drawing for himself. Finally, it should in some measure be communicable to other individuals. The relative importance of these criteria for a "good" image will vary with different persons in different situations; one will prize an economical and sufficient system, another an open-ended and communicable one.

Imageability

Since the emphasis here will be on the physical environment as the independent variable, this study will look for physical qualities which relate to the attributes of identity and structure in the mental image. This leads to the definition of what might be called *imageability*; that quality in a physical object which gives it a high probability of evoking a strong image in any given observer. It is that shape, color, or arrangement which facilitates the making of vividly identified, powerfully structured, highly useful mental images of the environment. It might also be called *legibility*, or perhaps *visibility* in a heightened sense,