"The City Image and its Elements"

from *The Image of the City* (1960)

Kevin Lynch

Editors' Introduction

Kevin Lynch (1918–1989) is the towering figure of twentieth-century urban design. *The Image of the City*, from which this selection is taken, is the most widely read urban design book of all time. Lynch was a professor of urban studies and planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology where he taught courses in urban design.

As a young student Kevin Lynch apprenticed himself to Frank Lloyd Wright. Drawing widely on material from psychology and the humanities, Lynch sought to understand how people perceive their environments and how design professionals can respond to the deepest human needs. Lynch's rambling, profoundly humane writings weave together a unique blend of theory and practical design suggestions drawn from his voluminous reading in history, anthropology, architecture, art, literature, and a host of other areas.

This influential chapter on "The City Image and its Elements" presents Lynch's best known concepts on how people perceive cities. Lynch argues that people perceive cities as consisting of underlying city form "elements" such as *paths* (along which movement flows) and *edges* (which differentiate one part of the urban fabric from another). If they understand how people perceive these elements and design to make cities more imageable, Lynch argues, urban designers can create more psychologically satisfying urban environments.

Urban designers throughout the world today sketch out the elements of cities or parts of cities they are designing as paths, edges, nodes, landmarks, and districts – the underlying elements of city form that Lynch identified – and draw on his theories and practical suggestions to strengthen the city image. Planners in cities as diverse as San Francisco, Cairo, Havana, and Ciudad Guyana in Venezuela, have used Lynch's concepts to inform their urban planning and design strategies.

Compare Lynch's ideas about what people find psychologically satisfying and aesthetically appealing about cities with Camillo Sitte's ideas (p. 413). Contrast his practical suggestions with William Whyte's applied principles and standards for park and plaza design (p. 429), and Frederick Law Olmsted's vision of urban parks (p. 362).

In addition to *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), Lynch's many books include a textbook on site design co-authored with Gary Hack, *Site Planning*, 3rd edn (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), *What Time Is This Place* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1979), a book on historic preservation, *Managing the Sense of a Region* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1976), and his magnum opus, *Good City Form* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991). Other of Lynch's writings are contained in Kevin Lynch, Tridib Banerjee and Michael Southworth (eds), *City Sense and City Design: Writings and Projects of Kevin Lynch* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

Other books on the way in which people perceive urban space include Anthony Hiss, *The Experience of Place* (New York: Knopf, 1990) and Robert Sommer, *Personal Space* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969). For more on urban design see Edmund Bacon, *The Design of Cities* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), Spiro Kostoff's *The City Shaped* (New York: Little Brown, 1991) and *The City Assembled* (New York: Little Brown, 1992), Mike Greenberg, *The Poetics of Cities: Designing Neighborhoods that Work* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press,

1995), and Doug Kelbaugh, *Common Place: Toward Neighborhood and Regional Design* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997).

There seems to be a public image of any given city which is the overlap of many individual images. Or perhaps there is a series of public images each held by some significant number of citizens. Such group images are necessary if an individual is to operate successfully within his environment and to cooperate with his fellows. Each individual picture is unique, with some content that is rarely or never communicated, yet it approximates the public image, which in different environments is more or less compelling, more or less embracing.

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The contents of the city images so far studied, which are referable to physical forms, can conveniently be classified into five types of elements: paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks . . . These elements may be defined as follows:

1 *Paths.* Paths are the channels along which the observer customarily, occasionally, or potentially moves. They may be streets, walkways, transit lines, canals, railroads. For many people, these are the predominant elements in their image. People observe the city while moving through it, and along these paths the other environmental elements are arranged and related.

2 *Edges.* Edges are the linear elements not used or considered as paths by the observer. They are the boundaries between two phases, linear breaks in continuity: shores, railroad cuts, edges of development, walls. They are lateral references rather than coordinate axes. Such edges may be barriers, more or less penetrable, which close one region off from another; or they may be seams, lines along which two regions are related and joined together. These edge elements, although probably not as dominant as paths, are for many people important organizing features, particularly in the role of holding together generalized areas, as in the outline of a city by water or wall.

3 *Districts.* Districts are the medium-to-large sections of the city, conceived of as having two-dimensional extent, which the observer mentally enters "inside of," and which are recognizable as having some common, identifying character. Always identifiable from the inside, they are also used for exterior reference if visible from the outside. Most people structure their city to some extent in this way, with individual differences as to whether paths or districts are the dominant elements. It seems to depend not only upon the individual but also upon the given city.

4 *Nodes.* Nodes are points, the strategic spots in a city into which an observer can enter, and which are the intensive foci to and from which he is traveling. They may be primarily junctions, places of a break in transportation, a crossing or convergence of paths, moments of shift from one structure to another. Or the nodes may be simply concentrations, which gain their importance from being the condensation of some use or physical character, as a street-corner hangout or an enclosed square. Some of these concentration nodes are the focus and epitome of a district, over which their influence radiates and of which they stand as a symbol. They may be called cores. Many nodes, of course, partake of the nature of both junctions and concentrations. The concept of node is related to the concept of path, since junctions are typically the convergence of paths, events on the journey. It is similarly related to the concept of district, since cores are typically the intensive foci of districts, their polarizing center. In any event, some nodal points are to be found in almost every image, and in certain cases they may be the dominant feature.

5 *Landmarks.* Landmarks are another type of point-reference, but in this case the observer does not enter within them, they are external. They are usually a rather simply defined physical object: building, sign, store, or mountain. Their use involves the singling out of one element from a host of possibilities. Some landmarks are distant ones, typically seen from many angles and distances, over the tops of smaller elements, and used as radial references. They may be within the city or at such a distance that for all practical purposes they symbolize a constant direction. Such are isolated towers, golden domes, great hills. Even a mobile point,

like the sun, whose motion is sufficiently slow and regular, may be employed. Other landmarks are primarily local, being visible only in restricted localities and from certain approaches. These are the innumerable signs, store fronts, trees, doorknobs, and other urban detail, which fill in the image of most observers. They are frequently used clues of identity and even of structure, and seem to be increasingly relied upon as a journey becomes more and more familiar.

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PATHS

For most people interviewed, paths were the predominant city elements, although their importance varied according to the degree of familiarity with the city. People with the least knowledge of Boston tended to think of the city in terms of topography, large regions, generalized characteristics, and broad directional relationships. Subjects who knew the city better had usually mastered parts of the path structure; these people thought more in terms of specific paths and their interrelationships. A tendency also appeared for the people who knew the city best of all to rely more upon small landmarks and less upon either regions or paths.

The potential drama and identification in the highway system should not be underestimated. One Jersey City subject, who can find little worth describing in her surroundings, suddenly lit up when she described the Holland Tunnel. Another recounted her pleasure:

> You cross Baldwin Avenue, you see all of New York in front of you, you see the terrific drop of land [the Palisades] . . . and here's this open panorama of Lower Jersey City in front of you and you're going downhill, and there you know: there's the tunnel, there's the Hudson River and everything . . . I always look to the right to see if I can see the . . . Statue of Liberty . . . Then I always look up to see the Empire State Building, see how the weather is . . . I have a real feeling of happiness because I'm going someplace, and I love to go places.

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Concentration of special use or activity along a street may give it prominence in the minds of observers. Washington Street in Boston is the outstanding Boston example: subjects consistently associated it with shopping and theaters . . . People seemed to be sensitive to variations in the amount of activity they encountered and sometimes guided themselves largely by following the main stream of traffic. Los Angeles' Broadway was recognized by its crowds and its street cars; Washington Street in Boston was marked by a torrent of pedestrians. Other kinds of activity at ground level also seemed to make places memorable, such as construction work near South Station, or the bustle of the food markets.

Characteristic spatial qualities were able to strengthen the image of particular paths. In the simplest sense, streets that suggest extremes of either width or narrowness attracted attention . . .

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Where major paths lacked identity, or were easily confused one for the other, the entire city image was in difficulty . . . Boston's Longfellow Bridge was not infrequently confused with the Charles River Dam, probably since both carry transit lines and terminate in traffic nodes . . .

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People tended to think of path destinations and origin points: they liked to know where paths came from and where they led. Paths with clear and well-known origins and destinations had stronger identities, helped tie the city together, and gave the observer a sense of his bearings whenever he crossed them. Some subjects thought of general destinations for paths, to a section of the city, for example, while others thought of specific places. One person, who made rather high demands for intelligibility upon the city environment, was troubled because he saw a set of railroad tracks, and did not know the destination of trains using them.

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EDGES

Edges are the linear elements not considered as paths: they are usually, but not quite always, the boundaries between two kinds of areas. They act as lateral references. They are strong in Boston and Jersey City but weaker in Los Angeles. Those edges seem strongest which are not only visually prominent, but also continuous in form and impenetrable to cross movement. The Charles River in Boston is the best example and has all of these qualities . . .

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It is difficult to think of Chicago without picturing Lake Michigan. It would be interesting to see how many Chicagoans would begin to draw a map of their city by putting down something other than the line of the lake shore. Here is a magnificent example of a visible edge, gigantic in scale, that exposes an entire metropolis to view. Great buildings, parks, and tiny private beaches all come down to the water's edge, which throughout most of its length is accessible and visible to all. The contrast, the differentiation of events along the line, and the lateral breadth are all very strong. The effect is reinforced by the concentration of paths and activities along its extent. The scale is perhaps unrelievedly large and coarse, and too much open space is at times interposed between city and water, as at the Loop. Yet the facade of Chicago on the Lake is an unforgettable sight.

DISTRICTS

Districts are the relatively large city areas which the observer can mentally go inside of, and which have some common character. They can be recognized internally, and occasionally can be used as external reference as a person goes by or toward them. Many persons interviewed took care to point out that Boston, while confusing in its path pattern even to the experienced inhabitant, has, in the number and vividness of its differentiated districts, a quality that quite makes up for it. As one person put it: "Each part of Boston is different from the other. You can tell pretty much what area you're in."

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Subjects, when asked which city they felt to be a well-oriented one, mentioned several, but New York (meaning Manhattan) was unanimously cited. And this city was cited not so much for its grid, which Los Angeles has as well, but because it has a number of well-defined characteristic districts, set in an ordered frame of rivers and streets. Two Los Angeles subjects even referred to Manhattan as being "small" in comparison to their central area! Concepts of size may depend in part on how well a structure can be grasped.

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Usually the typical features were imaged and recognized in a characteristic cluster, the thematic unit. The Beacon Hill image, for example, included steep narrow streets; old brick row houses of intimate scale; inset, highly maintained, white doorways; black trim; cobblestones and brick walks; quiet; and upper-class pedestrians. The resulting thematic unit was distinctive by contrast to the rest of the city and could be recognized immediately . . .

NODES

Nodes are the strategic foci into which the observer can enter, typically either junctions of paths, or concentrations of some characteristic. But although conceptually they are small points in the city image, they may in reality be large squares, or somewhat extended linear shapes, or even entire central districts when the city is being considered at a large enough level. Indeed, when conceiving the environment at a national or international level, then the whole city itself may become a node.

The junction, or place of a break in transportation, has compelling importance for the city observer. Because decisions must be made at junctions, people heighten their attention at such places and perceive nearby elements with more than normal clarity. This tendency was confirmed so repeatedly that elements located at junctions may automatically be assumed to derive special prominence from their location. The perceptual importance of such locations shows in another way as well. When subjects were asked where on a habitual trip they first felt a sense of arrival in downtown Boston, a large number of people singled out break-points of transportation as the key places . . .

LANDMARKS

Landmarks, the point reference considered to be external to the observer, are simple physical elements which may vary widely in scale. There seemed to be a tendency for those more familiar with a city to rely increasingly on systems of landmarks for their guides – to enjoy uniqueness and specialization, in place of the continuities used earlier.

Since the use of landmarks involves the singling out of one element from a host of possibilities, the key physical characteristic of this class is singularity, some aspect that is unique or memorable in the context. Landmarks become more easily identifiable, more likely to be chosen as significant, if they have a clear form; if they contrast with the background; and if there is some prominence of spatial location.

Figure–background contrast seems to be the principal factor. The background against which an element stands out need not be limited to immediate surroundings: the grasshopper weathervane of Faneuil Hall, the gold dome of the State House, or the peak of the Los Angeles City Hall are landmarks that are unique against the background of the entire city.

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