URBAN DESIGN

Kevin Lynch’s theoretical principles of urban design in the book

“The image of the city”

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Introduction:

Urban design has become one of the most important fields in the recent days. From my view of point, it is one of the necessary tools which help us to improve our cities and towns. I highly appreciated the chance which has been given to me to follow the Urban Design module. Through this an interesting module I have known the most famous urban designers, their ideas, theories, and concepts towards cities. This essay will be about Kevin Lynch. He is one of the essential persons in Urban Design discipline. His concepts and ideas are considered an important resource for planners, architects and every one who wants to practice urban design.

The author: His Life


He studied at Yale University, 1935-1937; Taliesin (under Frank Lloyd Wright), 1937-1939; Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, 1939-1940; and received the B.C.P. degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1947.

He was appointed instructor in city planning at MIT in 1948, assistant professor in 1949, associate professor in 1955, and professor in 1963. Lynch influenced the field of city planning through his work on the theory of city form, and on the perception of the city environment and its consequences for city design.

He consulted for many cities in the United States and abroad on projects including Boston's Government Center and Waterfront Park, Detroit's Riverfront, major art institutions in Dallas, and urban design plans in Minneapolis, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Diego.”(MIT Institute Archives & Special Collection)

We can realize to what extent Kevin Lynch’s influence has been important in shaping cities from reading what have been said about him and his book:

- Kevin Lynch is one of the three people who have been considered to have had most influence on shaping the urban environment. (Jarvis, 2003).
- “Lynch has been such an important figure within the field of urban design that it is impossible to do justice to his life’s work in a review article of this type” (Jones and Roberts, 1996).
- “Lynch’s influence in putting urban design on the intellectual map of city planning is undeniable and astonishingly broad: not only is his work well known in Europe and
Japan, but it is readily used in different fields and disciplines such as planning, architecture, and geography” (Moudon, 2003, p.363).

**His Work**

Lynch’s studies in urban design are an important resource of information. He depended on how people perceived what they see. He worked to analyze their pictures in a scientific way. His intellectual way in analysing cities makes everyone who is interested in urban design studies more aware of his environment and stimulates him to analyse what he sees. He combined his studies of people’s image with analyzing the history evolution of cities for designing cities in letter way.

“Lynch’s work is a good case in point illustrating the tensions between the two conceptual poles: Lynch researched people’s mental images and constructs of cities and analyzed the history evolution and meaning of places in order to seek better ways to design cities. However while in the image of the city (1960), substantive information is separated from prescriptive or normative advice in a theory of good city from (1981), the two are closely interwoven” (Moudon, 2003, p.364).

His books are:

- *The image of the city* (1961) “It summarises a 5-year study he co-directed with Gyorgy Kepes on how people perceive their cities” (MIT Institute Archives & Special Collections).

- *What time is this place* (1972) “It examines how time may be passed in cities, as well as urban conservation” (MIT Institute Archives & Special Collections). “A good place, according to Lynch, is one that not only tells us where we are (in time), but where we have been and where we are going and at what speed” (Ford, 1999, p.254).

- *Growing up in cities* (1977) “which he edited and which explores how environments affect children” (MIT Institute Archives & Special Collections).

- *A theory of good city form* (1981) “Lynch offers five "dimensions of performance": vitality, sense, fit, access, and control. These dimensions are not always easy to measure and they may be in conflict one with another” (Ford, 1999, p.255).
Lynch’s main urban design ideas

It is very useful to spot the principles and concepts which Lynch identified in the process of Design:

- “A good environmental image gives its possessor an important sense of emotional security. He can establish an harmonious relationship between himself and the outside world” (Lynch, 1960, P.4).

- “The designer must therefore create a city which is as richly provided with paths, edges, landmarks, nodes, and districts as possible, a city which makes use of not just one or two from qualities, but of all of them” (Lynch, 1960, P.110).

- “An existing, functional urban area has structure and identify even if only in weak measure” (Lynch, 1960, P.115).

- Lynch explain how to deal with the existing urban area and its weaknesses by :
  - Define its good and strong images.
  - Find solutions for its perceptual difficulties.
  - Seek for recreating its identity and structure through its disorder. (Lynch, 1960).

- “If art and audience grow together, then our cities will be a source of daily enjoyment to millions of their inhabitants” (Lynch, 1960, P.120).

- “We have great difficulty in bringing together social objectives and the environmental quality objectives, and also I think this is part of our culture to achieve sensual quality. I mean not only visual quality but the way things sound, smell, the way they feel underfoot - to bring those into ordinary planning decisions” (Lynch, 1983, Mending the city Conference).
The relationship between Lynch’s work and other works and theories:

I will move to another point which illustrates the relationship between Lynch’s works, especially, *The image of the city*, and other works. I will mention the criticism which had been published about Jane Jacobs and Gordon Cullen whose books appeared at the same time. Through this criticism we can understand more Lynch’s way in analysing cities.

**Jane Jacobs: The Death and Life of Great American cities (1961).**

She had been criticized for her way which depended on discursive approach. “Jacobs’ lack of systematic elaboration in terms of scientific procedures forms a strong contrast to the next book on our list, Kevin Lynch’s” (Jones & Roberts, 1996).

**Gordon Cullen: The concise Townscape (1961)**

“Perhaps the strongest criticism that can be Revealed against Cullen, or rather against the way that his ideas have been used, is that the aesthetic approach focuses too evidently on the Picturesque and has helped reinforce the sentimental, backward-looking tendencies of British urban design. This may have focused attention away from a forward-looking and socially relevant approach” (Jones & Roberts, 1996).

**The Book The Image of the City:**

“The Image of the City helped give rise to a new science of human perception and behaviour in the city (Jones & Roberts, 1996).

“The 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.”
To look at the new problem, the book analyses three American cities: Boston, Jersey City, and Los Angeles. “It suggests a method to deal with visual form at the urban scale, and offers some first principles of city design”.

In this regard, Kevin Lynch’s (1960) research is a key work in the field of urban imagery. Lynch's work used cognitive (mental) mapping as a main technique and was based on two analyses. A systematic field investigation of the area was made on foot by a trained observer and lengthy interviews were held with residents of Boston, Jersey City and Los Angeles to evoke their own images of their physical environment. Initially Lynch worked on legibility (i.e. how people orientated themselves and navigated within cities), but later on he discovered that the minor theme of city orientation grew into the major theme of the city's mental image which led him to the concept of 'imageability'. From his research, Lynch identified three attributes for environmental images to be 'workable': identity, structure and meaning. Moreover he identified five key physical elements – paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks – which ‘seem astonishingly similar in some very diverse cultures and places. We were lucky’ (Lynch, 1984, p.249).

Critics of Lynch’s work pointed out that observers were related to different backgrounds and experience, thus leading to different city images, and thus questioned the validity of aggregating the environmental images of people. In addition, Lynch’s focus was on perceptual knowledge of physical form and did not take into account what urban environment meant to people and how they felt about it.

The Image of the Environment
“Moving elements in a city, and in particular the people and their activities, are as important as the stationary parts.

- Legibility:
  A Legible city would be one whose districts or landmarks or pathways are easily identifiable and are easily grouped into an over-all pattern.

  The need to recognize and pattern our surroundings is so crucial, and has such long roots in the past, that this image has wide practical and emotional importance to the individual.

  A clear image of the surroundings is thus a useful basis for individual growth. A vivid and integrated physical setting, capable of producing a sharp image, plays a social role as well.
Building the Image:
Environmental images are the result of a tow-way process between the observer and his Environment.

Structure and Identity:
An environmental image may be analyzed into three components: identity, structure, and meaning.

Imageability:
That quality in a physical object which gives it a high probability of evoking a strong image in any given observer.

A highly imageable (apparent, legible, or visible) city in this peculiar sense would seem well formed, distinct, remarkable; it would invite the eye and the ear to greater attention and participation. The imageability of city form will be center of the study to follow. There are other basic properties in a beautiful environment: meaning or expressiveness, sensuous delight, rhythm, stimulus, choice. Our concentration on imageability does not deny their importance. Our purpose is simply to consider the need for identity and structure in our perceptual world, and to illustrate the special relevance of this quality to the particular case of the complex, shifting urban environment.

Three Cities

“Analyses were made of the central areas of three American cities: Boston, Massachusetts; Jersey City, New Jersey; and Los Angeles, California.

Two basic analyses:

A systematic field reconnaissance of the area was made on foot by a trained observer, who mapped the presence of various elements, their visibility, their image strength or weakness, and their connections, disconnections, and other interrelations, and who noted any special successes or difficulties in the potential image structure

A lengthy interview was held with a small sample of city residents to evoke their own images of their physical environment”

The city Image and Its Elements

“Kevin Lynch, a prominent Urban Design theorist, defined a method of analysing legibility based on five elements: paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks. Lynch defined these as follows:

Paths “are the channels along which the observer customarily, occasionally, or potentially moves. They may be streets, walkways, transit lines, canals, railroads ...”
• **Edges** “are the linear elements not used or considered as paths by the observer. They are boundaries between two phases, linear breaks in continuity: shores, railroad cuts, edges of development, walls …”

• **Districts** “are medium-to-large sections of the city, conceived of as having two-dimensional extent, which the observer mentally enters "inside of," and which are recognisable as having some common identifying character …”

• **Nodes** “are points, the strategic spots in a city into which an observer can enter, and which are intensive foci to and from which he is travelling. They may be primary 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.”

• **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”.

• **Element Interrelations** “To consider the interaction of pairs of like and unlike elements”

• **The Shifting Image** “It is very important to arrange in levels the series of comprehensive images for the entire environment which is large and complex.”

• **Image Quality** “when reshaping cities it should be possible to give them a form which facilitates these organizing efforts rather than frustrates them”.
Lynch used symbols to indicate to the five elements throughout the city. The maps for the city showed the weaknesses, strengthens, distinctive elements, as derived from the interviews, sketch maps, and the field.

For example the map shows the visual form of Boston as seen in the field.

How the author’s concepts may be relevant for the project

Paths: A lot of paths through Benarty lack of attraction and continuity. Some of them have no edges on one of the two sides and that matter makes them weak in function and appearance. Paths could be more attractive by affording special facades of important buildings and existing of exciting activities along them.

For example: Hill road in Ballingry could be more active by providing activities along its way and reconsidering the relationship between it and the community center. Redesign the community center can provide the road with distinctive facades and interesting open space. It is important to try to provide Hill road with identity. That it is the essential road which has some shops in Ballingry. Besides visitor to Ballingry will, at first, pass it and that mean its image will give the first impression to the visitor.

Picture (1): Shows the relationship between the Community Center and the Hill Road
Edges: Lack of strong edges along the paths. Benarty has beautiful edges which aren’t exploited in perfect and useful way. For example: the edge along the road between Ballingry and Lochore and the edge along the Lochore Castle road.

Picture (3): Shows the poor edge along the Lochore Castle road.

Nodes: Nodes in Benarty need to be stronger especially where there is junction or place of a break in transportation. At the meantime these nodes have no influence in the image of Benarty. It is very important to improve the quality of them such as Junctions in Benarty because they are the places where people make decisions, so their attention becomes higher at such places and they can recognize the nearby elements with more than ordinary precision.

Landmarks: Landmarks in Benarty are weak references because they are Large and singular. In addition, the poor paths and weak nodes contribute to that statue.

Picture (2): Shows the Business center as a weak landmark which needs a strong node.

Finally, the crucial issue which is worked on in Benarty is the community involvement. People in Benarty are able to make a great progress to their towns for two reasons. Firstly,
they have the tools, the essential elements, beautiful environment, historical symbols, and the motivation to improve their towns. Secondly, they live there, so they are able to define the problems they suffer from. With cooperation between them and urban designers they can achieve what they want and what makes their towns more beautiful and delightful one. “Where there is a good deal of participation with real contact between the user and the designer - which doesn't exist downtown and hardly exists in the historic districts - those are probably the most successful examples of urban design in our country”(Jarvis, 2003).
References


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