
Kevin Lynch And His Contribution To The Urban Planning Theory

Summary

Kevin Lynch, born in 1918 and a Chicago native, was a renowned urban planner and author who became a catalyst in the fields of city planning and urban design during the twentieth century. He studied Architecture at Yale University, City Planning at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and spent the next thirty years at his alma mater as an Urban Planning Instructor until his joint partnership with famed architect and urban designer, Stephen Carr. Together, they embarked on various projects in the US and worldwide. Through his research, published books, and journey as a practicing architect-planner, he motivated urban designers to think differently by offering new perspectives in designing cities. Written under the guidance of Professor Gyorgy Kepes at the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies at MIT, *Image of the City* (1960), gave light on how equally valuable it is for planners to invest time in understanding the people's subjective views to fill in the gaps that may exist in objective city forms.

Image of the City, one of his most acclaimed books, explored the differences and similarities in residents' visual perceptions and aesthetical experiences in the cities of Los Angeles, Boston and New Jersey. Seeking answers on concepts that were unfamiliar and detached to planners before, Lynch paved a way in bringing importance to relationships that exists between the lived experiences of residents and the built environment of cities. And in order to analyze this, questions such as the following were tackled: (1) What impact do patterns and arrangements of elements around a city do to its residents?; (2) How can planners advocate for balance when contrasts between urban forms and visual perception exists?; (3) How can planners promote for a more harmonious city when individuals are hardly ever aware of the positive consequences of one?; (4) How can planners, developers, and urbanists stay fluid yet relevant at the same time?. Although it may not seem so, he believed that his research is not all-encompassing of what should become of cities with regards to its appearance, stating that it is a "preliminary exploration, a first word not a last word," and rather, "it is an attempt to capture ideas and to suggest how they might be developed and tested."

Making it imperative that his claims are intended only as guidance, and should not depict other internal and external factors that could be brought about in city designing in the later years of his writing. His study, accumulated over the course of five years, focused primarily on recognizing the impacts of place legibility (also referred as imageability or visibility). Lynch described legibility as the "clarity" with which people interact with their surroundings in relation to the city's layout and how the city creates a clear mental map to the inhabitants for their way-finding in the city to avoid disorientation and achieve sense of emotional security. The five elements of this mental map of the city include: path (routes); edge (boundaries and breaks in continuity); district (areas of common characteristics); node (squares and junctions), and landmarks (external points of orientations). He considered paths as the most important since it provides urban mobility to guide inhabitants in their movements and recognizing city structures. Lynch references to the three cities (i. e. Boston, New Jersey and Los Angeles) in order for the reader to have full grasps of his theories on creating clear mental maps of the city.

In addition, Lynch also described the three components of environmental image such as (a) identity which means the recognition of urban elements as separate entities; (b) structure which pertains to the relation of urban elements to other objects and to the observer; and (c) meaning which captures the emotional value to the observer. Lynch conducted interviews of selected people and performed analysis of the city's environmental images applied two principal methods to measure his concept of imageability of a city. The interview questions aimed to test the imageability hypothesis, gather the participants rough approximation of three cities concerned for comparison with the field reconnaissance and to gather some views on urban design and identify a quick method to measure how a public image triggers emotions to city inhabitants. While the use of these methods was proved to be successful, criticisms on the small sample size and unbalanced nature of the samples and therefore did not represent the general population. Lynch's innovations have also acted as a precedent to other studies by other known planners such as Fredric Jameson and Henri Lefebvre. Fredric Jameson argues Lynch's imageability and its clear mental map is the complex combination of the inhabitant's objective and experiences of the 'lived' space. Henri Lefebvre also argues Lynch is not only not based on a mathematical entity or structural images of the city but on the social impact and experiences the city brings.

Review

Cities are everywhere and the majority of us have had at least encountered what it feels like to be in one. Thus, it is imperative to start acknowledging how we could improve it - making it easier for everyone to understand, navigate, manipulate and most importantly, optimize any given space. Several cities around the world could be described as beautiful, however, there are only a limited number of cities that could also be characterized as a place that operates with proper intent and fulfills its true meaning. The majority of cities today have continuously isolated elements that, as shown by Lynch, only satisfies sufficiency and security of the basic needs of its inhabitants but has neglected the positive aspects of a legible surrounding. We've evolved with technology - businesses are readily accessible online, anything we desire can be delivered to us with just a touch of a button, interacting with others have become more effortless – yet, the art of creating legible cities have been lost. This is the very reason why it is important for planners to familiarize themselves with the ideas outlined by Lynch in the *Image of the City* (1960). The following years after its introduction, Lynch's findings have become an integral framework in building for the observers and the observed. Constructing a more imageable pattern and clear-cut form of city elements could attract more residents to explore and interact with their cities than just simply moving along with it. From my own experience, whether I am driving or walking, traveling in a familiar city is fairly simple as I am able to recognize the patterns of the routes I take and those I need to follow. However, in places that are difficult to navigate through, like the University of Waterloo campus, I still find myself looking at the site plans on the wall or signage along a path, asking for directions from others, and pausing every so often while walking to re-assess where I am heading to.

On a larger scale, living within the suburbs of Brampton, when examining the visual context of my hometown, it is harder to differentiate between our neighbourhood and other adjacent suburban neighbourhoods because of the typical repetitive and cookie-cutter patterns - a radical characteristic of suburbia. When thinking about suburbs, buildings and infrastructures are built simply for efficiency. As an example, neighbourhood plazas and big box stores are no different from one another. It is considered to be a cheaper and faster alternative, even when there is a

loss of structural creativity, identity and sense of place. Exterior sides where residents are not expected to travel are left bare, further encouraging them to overlook these areas. Neglecting it only results to a negative notion of ignorance and erasure of local experience; at this day and age, we are swimming in information, technology, and knowledge, yet we choose to ignore the numerous potential of what our cities could become. The 'unwalkable' nature of suburbs and the proliferation of segregated uses for land have resulted in a toxic dependency on cars, inefficient use of our resources, and an increase in the sense of abandonment in our cities. Juxtaposed to what Jane Jacobs has reiterated time and again as well as Kevin Lynch's own arguments, that as planners and shapers of our cities, it is an integral part of our mission to ensure that we do not fail to look at the "micro" levels or fine-grained details of what constitutes a harmonious life in our cities.

Several eras have materialized and passed, but some narratives of urban development and city designing are still constantly excluded in the recent years, such as creating a legible character that focuses on the interaction between the observers and the observed as outlined by Lynch. As planners, we need to rethink and relearn the ways in which we could become partners with the public no matter how global or technology-reliant we become in the near future. With the emergence of better and more advanced technology, our world has become smaller. The use of Geographic Information Systems or GIS technology in city designing and urban planning is not unheard of. It has been used for analysis, modeling, visualization and to gain a better understanding of the trends that exist on our land uses, infrastructure or population growth. It has given planners the capability to regulate demands, identify opportunities and predict negative or positive impacts of projects to the environment. If we could learn to unforgivingly balance the use of technologies like GIS and the teachings of Lynch, Jacobs and Le Febvre on how to optimize our social spaces, and perhaps, we could progress together as a dynamic and vibrant society.

Reading the book has encouraged me to think differently and divert my focus on the minute neighbourhood details that we could start changing in order to eliminate the blurred distinctions that are still prevalent in most of our cities - the distinction between what constitutes a beautiful and meaningful city to one that is only erected for human settlement. In this context, although it has been sixty years since its publication, I believe that Lynch's innovation with legibility or imageability in our cities is still a relevant topic that planners and residents alike should familiarize themselves with. It has allowed me to understand how people interact, inhabit, and manipulate their own urban landscapes. It highlighted that the mental perceptions of people are as equally valuable as each cities' physical characteristics. On a critical note, he was not able to make connections to the other senses such as hearing, smelling or even touch, limiting his study on the sense of vision. This factor could be rendered as a flaw or even problematic as this ignores the struggles of people who do not solely rely on their vision in their way-finding around the city. Also, the majority of cities today use slogans or taglines to promote their cities, yet it rarely is analogous to the perception and mental-image of its inhabitants. This goes to show that cities are indeed lacking in developing the perfect balance between their objective urban elements and the subjective image of their own residents.

In the end, it is an indisputable fact that a perfect result is rarely achieved in the urban planning realm, however, there is a big difference when we become committed to change, acknowledging the importance of each and everyone's roles, and translating each individual's uniqueness through urban form and visual aesthetics in our own cities.

Synopsis

Cities around the world have evolved, yet we have also grown in ignorance regarding its structural identity - resulting in the loss of our city's uniqueness, individuality and sense of place. Image of the City, published in 1960 by architect-planner Kevin Lynch, is about the importance of the city's image and how the citizens interact, inhabit, and manipulate it through their own visual perceptions. Lynch also highlights how we could improve cities by analysing the basic elements of what constitutes a legible and vibrant image – offering a new perspective to understanding the very place we inhabit. This book encapsulates the foundation of designing cities through the lens of its residents, and therefore, a must read for urban planning students and experts alike.

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