

Book Review

July 2015

The Image of the City

Kevin Lynch, The M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, 194 pages, 1960.

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Summary

Kevin Lynch is one of the all-time best contributors to the art and science of city design. *The Image of the City*, written before 1960, contains many terms and ideas that are now clichés. He develops theory and language based on his study of three towns: Boston, Jersey City and Los Angeles.

The book is short, only some 120 pages of discussion followed by 70+ pages of Appendix. Summarizing such a rich and compact presentation is not a great idea since the work itself is so readily available; however, there are several ideas to highlight. First, Mr. Lynch presents the city as an emotional experience that exists in different weathers and lights, at different times of day and season and at different points in history. We can never see the entire city, we only see and experience pieces. The city always changes; one never finds the city the same from day to day.

The second notion is his observation that “We are not simple observers of this spectacle, but are ourselves a part of it, on the stage with the other participants.”

There is no end state. The city goes on and on. “There is no final result, only a continuous succession of phases.” This is an often overlooked facet of cities when considering improvements and budgets. While safety considerations demand priority, most projects can be scheduled over some extended time frame. Everything does not have to be done now, or done all at once. The luxury of time is an asset not well used.



Born	Kevin Andrew Lynch January 7, 1918 Chicago, Illinois
Died	April 25, 1984 (aged 66) Aquinnah, Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts
Institutions	Massachusetts Institute of Technology (1949–1978)
<i>Alma mater</i>	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Main interests	Urban planning ; environmental psychology ; urban form
Principal ideas	Mental mapping ; wayfinding ; imageability
Major works	The Image of the City <i>What Time is This Place?</i> <i>A Theory of Good Urban Form</i>
Notable awards	Rexford G. Tugwell Award (1984)

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In Chapter III, Mr. Lynch gives us his list of the elements of the city along with a concise definition of each. The list includes:

1. Paths,
2. Edges,
3. Districts,
4. Nodes, and
5. Landmarks.

The elements offer an organizing framework still useful in the post-urbanist world. He relates these to three towns he studied which provides a useful demonstration of his thought process and offers a nostalgic look at the three towns for those familiar with them now or in their heyday of the nineteen fifties. One could get the sense that over the past half century, we have not progressed in creating livable cities.

Chapter IV is where the action starts. Mr. Lynch starts his journey for “forming our new city world into an imageable landscape: visible, coherent and clear.” He previously used the term urban design, not a common term in his day. He observes that objects, like a tree, while beautiful, are single purpose. “A city is a multi-purpose, shifting organization”. City planning and design needs to respond to this temporally mobile, ever-changing organism in order to be useful.

This chapter goes on to discuss the holistic nature of the city and to remind the reader that the list is for the convenience of analysis and study; “they will act as building blocks for the designer.” Their combinations, context and sequences are the stuff of city planning and design. Painting the entire picture is the purpose.

Chapter V continues his innovative thoughts with discussions about:

- “a large city can have a sensuous form”,
- A metropolis will have a “complicated pattern, continuous and whole, yet intricate and mobile”,
- “sense of place”,
- “By the intensity of life itself and the close packing of its disparate people, the great city is a romantic place, rich in symbolic detail.”

He concludes by saying the visual and sensual aspects of the present and future city should become a normal and integral part of the comprehensive plan.

As discussed in other works of TheAmericanCity.org, The City Sociable is a necessary part of The City’s General Plan. Cities and towns are emotional experiences; the best cities use their economic and physical assets to create a sense of well-being, curiosity, fulfillment and joy.

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YouTube: In addition to the reviews cited below, check out:

Obraz Miasta "The Image of the City" Kevin Lynch ARCHIVOLTA



Kanał użytkownika WydARCHIVOLTA

Mr. Lynch discusses his five types of elements of the city in the context of Los Angeles: edges, nodes, districts, landmarks and paths.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OHwbRLu0ymo>

Published Reviews

- **review: Kevin Lynch – The Image of the City**

by [Michiel de Lange](#) on May 8, 2009

As part of a new effort of The Mobile City to compile an ever-expanding [overview of literature](#) relevant to our themes, I will review this oldie-goldie published in 1960. I

particularly assess its enduring relevance for understanding the current relation between mobile & locative media and the city.

<http://themobilecity.nl/2009/05/08/review-kevin-lynch-the-image-of-the-city/>

- **The Image of the City**

by [Kevin Lynch](#)

... 4.00 · [rating details](#) · 1,623 ratings · 65 reviews

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 r [...more](#)

http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/647351.The_Image_of_the_City



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Wednesday, May 28

Book: The Image of the City

topic: [Reading List](#)

Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City*, published in 1960, is well-established as a classic text of urban design and planning. The primary insight developed in this small book is that the structure of a city exists not only in physical reality but also in the minds of its inhabitants. This thesis of "imageability" launched another angle from which city planning could be researched and organized around. True to his era, Lynch emphasized such traits as efficiency and tended toward abstract principles, but I think there are still valuable lessons that can be gleaned from his approach.

Source: <http://discoveringurbanism.blogspot.com/2008/05/book-image-of-city.html>

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