



# THEORIES AND MANIFESTOES

OF CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE

*Edited by Charles Jencks and Karl Kropf*

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*The Image of the City*

The *Image of the City* was published at a time when the aridity of Modernist theories of urbanism had reached an extreme. In that environment, Kevin Lynch's (b 1918, d 1989) pragmatic, perceptually based approach to urban form was all the more readily absorbed. His concern for the legibility of cities countered the abstract rationalism of CIAM as well as the unavoidable reality of suburban sprawl. Lynch taught planning and urban design at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and published extensively, including *What Time is This Place?* (1972), *Managing the Sense of a Region* (1976) and *A Theory of Good City Form* (1981).

**The City Image and its Elements**

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 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 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.

This analysis limits itself to the effects of physical, perceptible objects. There are other influences on imageability, such as the social meaning of an area, its function, its history, or even its name. These will be glossed over, since the objective here is to uncover the role of form itself. It is taken for granted that in actual design form should be used to reinforce meaning, and not to negate it.

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. Indeed, these elements may be of more general application, since they seem to reappear in many types of environmental images . . . 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 to the observer. They are 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 travelling. 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 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 symbol . . .
- 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 . . . (pp46-48).

## City Form

We have the opportunity of forming our new city world into an imageable landscape: visible, coherent, and clear. It will require a new attitude on the part of the city dweller, and a physical reshaping of his domain into forms which entrance the eye, which organize themselves from level to level in time and space, which can stand as symbols for urban life. The present study yields some clues in this respect.

Most objects which we are accustomed to call beautiful, such as a painting or a tree, are single-purpose things, in which, through long development of the impress of one will, there is an intimate, visible linkage from fine detail to total structure. A city is a multi-purpose, shifting organization, a tent for many functions, raised by many hands and with relative speed. Complete specialization, final meshing, is improbable and undesirable. The form must be somewhat non-committal, plastic to the purposes and perceptions of its citizens.

Yet there are fundamental functions of which the city forms may be expressive: circulation, major land-uses, key focal points. The common hopes and pleasures, the sense of community may be made flesh. Above all, if the environment is visibly organized and sharply identified, then the citizen can inform it with his own meanings and connections. Then it will become a true *place*, remarkable and unmistakable . . .

As an artificial world, the city should be so in the best sense: made by art, shaped for human purposes. It is our ancient habit to adjust to our environment, to discriminate and organize perceptually whatever is present to our senses. Survival and dominance based themselves on this sensuous adaptability, yet now we may go on to a new phase of interaction. On home grounds, we may begin to adapt the environment itself to the perceptual pattern and symbolic process of the human being . . .

To heighten the imageability of the urban environment is to facilitate its visual identification and structuring. The elements isolated above – the paths, edges, landmarks, nodes and regions – are the building blocks in the process of making firm, differentiated structures at the urban scale . . . (pp91-95)

### Form Qualities

These clues for urban design can be summarized in another way, since there are common themes that run through the whole set: the repeated references to certain general physical characteristics. These are the categories of direct interest in design, since they describe qualities that a designer may operate upon. They might be summarized as follows:

- 1 *Singularity of Figure-Ground Clarity*: sharpness of boundary . . .
- 2 *Form Simplicity*: clarity and simplicity of visible form in the geometrical sense, limitation of parts . . .
- 3 *Continuity*: continuance of edge or surface (as in street, channel, skyline, or setback) . . .
- 4 *Dominance*: dominance of one part over others by means of size, intensity, or interest, resulting in the reading of the whole as a principle feature with an associated cluster . . .
- 5 *Clarity of Joint*: high visibility of joints and seams (as at major intersection, or on a sea front) . . .
- 6 *Directional Differentiation*: asymmetries, gradients, and radial references which differentiate one end from another . . .
- 7 *Visual Scope*: qualities which increase the range and penetration of vision, either actually or symbolically. These include transparencies . . . overlaps . . . vistas and panoramas . . .
- 8 *Motion Awareness*: the qualities which make sensible to the observer, through both the visual and the kinesthetic senses his own actual or potential motion . . .
- 9 *Times Series*: series which are sensed over time, including both simple item-by-item linkages . . . and also series which are truly structured in time and thus melodic in nature . . .
- 10 *Names and Meanings*: non-physical characteristics which may enhance the imageability of an element . . . (pp105-108)

Extracts. Source: Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City*, MIT Press (Cambridge, Mass), 1960.  
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