

Reconsidering the image of the city

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[1984]

The Image of the City was published over 20 years ago, and it is still listed in bibliographies. It is time to wonder what it led to. The research was done by a small group with no training in the methods they used, and no literature to guide them. Several motives led them to the study:

1. An interest in the possible connection between psychology and the urban environment, at a time when most psychologists—at least, those in the field of perception—preferred controlled experiments in the laboratory to the wandering variables of the complicated, real environment. We hoped to tempt some of them out into the light of day.
2. Fascination with the aesthetics of the city landscape, at a time when most U.S. planners shied away from the subject, because it was “a matter of taste” and had a low priority.
3. Persistent wonder about how to evaluate a city, as architects do so automatically when presented with a building design. Shown a city plan, planners would look for technical flaws, estimate quantities, or analyze trends, as if they were contractors about to bid on the job. We hoped to think about what a city should be, and we were looking for possibilities of designing directly at that scale.
4. Hope of influencing planners to pay more attention to those who live in a place—to the actual human experience of a city, and how it should affect city policy.

These motives found an early outlet in an erratic seminar on the aesthetics of the city in 1952, which

considered, among several other similar themes, the question of how people actually found their way about the streets of big cities. Various other unconnected ideas sprouted during a subsequent fellowship year spent walking the streets of Florence, which were recorded in some brief and unpublished “Notes on City Satisfactions.” These ideas matured during 1954, when I had the opportunity of working with Gyorgy Kepes on a Rockefeller grant devoted to the “perceptual form of the city.” As we walked the Boston streets and wrote notes to each other, and as I listened to his torrent of ideas on perception and daily experience, the minor theme of city orientation grew into the major theme of the mental image of the environment.

Undoubtedly, there were many other less explicit influences: from John Dewey, with his emphasis on experience, to ideas of the “transactional” psychologists, with their view of perception as an active transaction between person and place. I had done fairly extensive reading in psychology, without finding much that was helpful. I had always learned much more from stories, memoirs, and the accounts of anthropologists. We were not then aware of K. E. Boulding’s key study, *The Image*,¹ which was published at the same time as our own work and became an important theoretical underpinning of it. The role of the environmental image was an idea in the air, however.

The first study was too simple to be quite respectable. We interviewed 30 people about their mental picture of the inner city of Boston, and then we repeated the exercise in Jersey City (which we guessed might be characterless) and Los Angeles (booked as the motorized city). We took Boston