

“Should one be satisfied then,” Sitte asks rhetorically, “to place this mechanically produced project, conceived to fit any situation, into the middle of an empty place without organic relation to its surroundings or to the dimensions of any particular building?” (p. 75). Indeed, he was certain that one should not.

Formalist ideas like Sitte’s can be seen in the works of the recent generation of urban designers, such as Allan Jacobs’ (1993) fine writing on street definition. Edmund Bacon (1974) adds a number of additional guides to good form, demanding that good design should interlock and interrelate buildings across space.

Bacon stresses that the human experience of this articulated space happens along an axis of movement. To define this axis, the designer may strategically place small and large buildings to create scale linkages receding in space; or insert in the landscape an arch, gate, or pair of pylons that set the frame of reference for structures appearing on a recessed plane. The designer may also repeat similar forms in diminishing perspective, as an arch may be placed deep behind another arch, to create unifying form in space and foster the human experience of penetrating into depth. And the designer may use stairs, ramps, and other changes in gradient to engage the participant in the satisfaction of experiencing ascent and descent.

Though such spatial relationships may be elementary to an architect working on a single property, they are problematic to the urban designer, who lacks the architect’s comprehensive control over her medium. The urban designer’s realm contains multiple properties owned by separate owners, with differing interests, who commission buildings from disparately motivated architects. Indeed it is this condition that sets up the urban designer’s formal compositional challenge: to use proportion, enclosure, interlocking points, recession planes, penetration in depth, and ascent and descent, among other formal relationships, to sustain a satisfying experiential continuity across properties. As these interrelationships escape the confines of the individual property, the urban designer faces the further challenge that she must work in a politicized environment, so that despite the designer’s partial dependence on an architectural heritage, her work belongs squarely in the planning discipline.

Of these formal interrelationships across buildings, proportion may be the longest recognized, since it can be traced back to classical architecture,

yet the least well understood. Writing in 1909, English town planner Raymond Unwin (1994), whose work drew heavily on Sitte, declared that we “need to establish relation and proportion between parts of our design” (p. 176). But what proportions should we favor? We can infer from Sitte that principles of proportion—of relative dimension—need not arise from mystical Pythagorean formulas, but from insight into the beholder’s experience of space. The operations of the land market do not reliably generate proportionate relationships across parcel boundaries. Whether any economic actor wants it or not, formal spatial relationships transcend—literally rise above and cross over—formal property lines and use rights. Urban form is a non-commodifiable resource. Relation and proportion at the urban scale cannot arise through the impersonal mechanism of the market; they must be willfully brought into existence through planning—through a design intelligence exercised on the collective behalf.

## Legibility

For Kevin Lynch, too, the city’s designer had to deal with the experiential quality of the city, what he often called the “sensuous qualities” or simply “sense” of place (Banerjee & Southworth, 1991, p. 6). Through a career spanning several decades, he was remarkably persistent in searching for the concepts that could inform and guide the design of cities. Of all the ideas he experimented with, the most distinctive and enduring was legibility.

As explained in *The Image of the City* (Lynch, 1960), a legible city is one whose constituent parts “are easily identifiable and are easily grouped into an over-all pattern” (p. 3). A distinctive and ordered environment helps the resident orient himself, place parts of the city into coherent categories, and acquire a sense of security that he can relate to the surrounding urban world. Hence, the city should be made “imageable,” both in the sense that it projects distinctions and relationships that the observer can comprehend and in the sense that it complies with the observer’s “mental picture” of the city (p. 6).

Compared to Sitte, who favors spatial effects (such as obliquely related streets entering a plaza) whose explanation escapes the naive viewer, Lynch suggests clearly comprehensible interrelationships, even recommending perpendicular or other rectilinear relationships that users can remember and identify with.