Readings/Rereadings

A City with a Sense
Back to Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City*

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Three Challenging and Remarkable Books

At the beginning of the 1960s three of the most influential books on the topic of the analysis and design of cities were published. These were *The Image of the City* by Kevin Lynch [Lynch 1960], *Townscape* by Gordon Cullen [Cullen 1961], and *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* by Jane Jacobs [Jacobs 1961]. These three books contained critiques of the approach to town-planning adopted after the Second World War, proposing a new way of understanding cities and intervening in them [1].
All three became essential readings for anybody with an interest in town-planning. They remain relevant down to the present day thanks to fresh editions in various languages. Anyone who has recently read any of these books will realize that perusing them still causes a strong emotional impact, with a decisive influence over day-to-day perceptions of cities. This is true to such an extent that when one moves through streets, squares and districts, one is conditioned by the ideas developed by their authors. Nonetheless, despite having many features in common in their observations, critiques and proposals, the three books have very different starting points.

Gordon Cullen studied architecture, but specialized as a draughtsman for other architects, also holding the post of artistic director of the *Architectural Review (AR)* for many years, and as a professional consultant in the area of town-planning. Cullen saw the city as an artist, as a champion of city design, attentive to the small details that might improve the quality of a given place. *Townscape* constituted an entire manifesto, drawn up on the basis of graphical analysis of a series of prior studies, or modest strategies for urban design, that Cullen allowed to bubble out in a somewhat random fashion. Indeed, it is more the plans and drawings full of suggestions that give this book particular value [2], and less the text, which is somewhat disorganized and occasionally unintelligible, being the result of improvisations and bright ideas from the editorial team of *AR*.
As is well known *Townscape* was an anthology of articles that had appeared in *AR* between 1947 and 1956. The publishers of this journal intended to stir up debate and promote a long campaign (the Townscape movement) in favour of more humane urban design, at the service of individuals living in cities or in country towns [3]. Their ideas took shape in two monographic issues of *AR*, entitled *Outrage* (1955) and *Counter-At-*

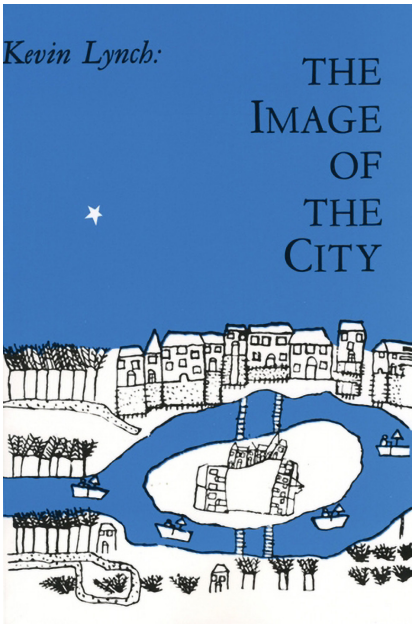

Fig. 1. Cover of the first edition [Lynch 1960].

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tack (1956). In these, they put forward criticisms of the planning of the New Towns and the urban sprawl whose uncontrolled growth was destroying the English countryside, both having a negative effect on established towns and cities.
The book *Townscape* was set within the English tradition of the picturesque. Gordon Cullen makes this plain when he refers to cities as an urban landscape, and to *townscape* as the *art of environment*, the art of linking and intertwining parts to achieve an urban scene that is more attractive, pleasant and satisfactory for the inhabitants of the place.
Kevin Lynch was familiar with, and set value on, the Townscape Movement promoted by *AR*, and in fact there are main points in common between his ideas and Cullen's one. All the same, Lynch pointed to the lack of a broader, more theoretical and academic study of cities as a whole.
Jane Jacobs was also self-taught, guided by her common sense and her sharp observational skills at street level. She was a social activist and an influencer of opinion from the time in 1952 when she joined *Architectural Forum*. Despite her not being linked to any academic institution, her criticisms of the destruction arising from the urban renewal that had been promoted in working-class districts of New York from the 1930s onwards were decisive in putting a brake on several projects for internal reconstruction of large areas of the city. Her activist stance in favour of participation by citizens and residents, her articles, and her contribution to the Conference on *Urban Design* held at the Harvard University in April 1956 (included in the August issue of *Progressive Architecture*), where she participated on an equal footing with figures like J.L. Sert, R. Neutra, G. Kepes, L. Mumford, E. Bacon and others, brought her to great prominence [4].
Two years later, her article *Downtown is for People* came out in *Fortune* magazine in April 1958, causing a strong impact on the directors of the Rockefeller Foundation through its sharp criticisms of city design. They awarded her a grant in September of that year so that she could develop her ideas, which took concrete form in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, published in October 1961 [Jacobs 1961].
Jane Jacobs studied Lynch's book in detail, commenting on many of his ideas in the draft of her own book. However, under pressure from her publisher, who wanted to reduce the manuscript to half its initial length and stress criticism more than theory, she had to leave out all these passages. The points Jacobs had in common with the ideas of the *Townscape Movement* are clear, especially when it came to questions of residential density, contact between people, crowded spaces, the need to avoid visual monotony, the intensity and vitality of activities, the diversity and mix of uses, organizing complexity, and similar matters.
Unlike Gordon Cullen and Jane Jacobs, Kevin Lynch (1918 to 1984) was above all a university teacher, a researcher into the theory of urban design as seen from an academic viewpoint and using a methodology based on case studies, public surveys, interviews, and the like (fig. 2). *The Image of the City* is his best known book, and undoubtedly his best and most lasting contribution to the field. It may be that his great keenness for academic rigour and conceptual models was a drawback for some of his later publications. To a present-day reader they may seem cumbersome, because of their insistence on exhaustive treatment of every topic, examining matters from every point of view and subjecting them to critiques.

Fig. 2. Kevin A. Lynch.

The Image of the City was published in 1960, but its origins went back a lot farther than might be supposed, and a crucial role was played in them by the impact of his being able to live in the city of Florence for the academic year 1952 to 1953 (fig. 2). It was there that many of his intuitions on how to perceive urban form finally crystalized. These were ideas that he had gradually built up since his joining the School of Architecture and Planning of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology as a teacher in 1948. He continued to deepen these ideas from 1954 onwards thanks to a research project funded by the Rockefeller Foundation's Program for Urban Design Research.
In general terms, Lynch's research may be described as the seeking for a method that would allow understanding and analysis of how people perceive the physical form of their city, its character and urban atmosphere, and how they find their bearings within it, live in it and

value it. Overall, the aim was to find principles permitting the description of these experiences. These principles were also useful for urban designers in organizing and giving a visible, coherent and clear shape to the surroundings.
He wrote of all this in *The Image of the City*. However, there were further books published over the next twenty years by the M.I.T. Press: *Site Planning* [Lynch 1962], *What Time is this Place?* [Lynch 1972], *Managing the Sense of a Region* [Lynch 1976] and *A Theory of a Good City Form* [Lynch 1981].

Florence: Discovering a Good City Form

At the present time, the best source for becoming acquainted with Kevin Lynch's academic career, apart from the works quoted above, is the book *City Sense and City Design: Writing and Projects of Kevin Lynch* [Lynch 1990]. This is an anthology of scattered texts that includes many references and pieces of biographical information in the presentations to its various sections [Banerjee, Southworth 1990]. Additional sources may be found in the architect's records available in the MIT Institute Archives [MIT Institute Archives and Special Collections 2009].
Lynch's earlier life, like that of many architects of his generation, was marked by the interruption of studies caused by the Second World War. However, in his case the hiatus of the war served to clarify his ideas after a somewhat erratic university experience.
Lynch was born in Chicago in 1918. In 1935 he began studying architecture at Yale, but gave up after two years, disappointed by the excessively academic and conservative style of teaching. Encouraged by hopes of an alternative approach, in Autumn 1937 he joined the Taliesin Fellowship, where he remained for just a year and a half, because he came to realize that the methods used by Frank Lloyd Wright boiled down to shaping his disciples in his own image. It is striking that in an early letter sent by Lynch from Yale to Wright in relation to the programme of studies at Taliesin he asked him about the training he would receive in city-planning. The answer he received was not very convincing, as was borne out by his experiences at Taliesin. After this unsatisfactory experience he decided to study construction engineering during the 1939 to 1940 academic year at the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute located in Troy in New York State, but he did not persevere with this new attempt, either, and ended up by taking work as a draughtsman in an architectural office in his home town.
In 1941 Kevin Lynch was conscripted and he had to serve in the Engineer Corps of the Army until the end of the war. After being demobilized, influenced by the book *The Culture of Cities* by Lewis Mumford [Mumford 1938], he read for a Bachelor's Degree in City Planning at MIT, this time a good decision for him. In 1947 he presented his final year dissertation on *Controlling the Flow of Rebuilding and Replanning in Residential Areas,* which was given an excellent mark by the board of examiners.
Although Lynch had no Master's Degree, the recently created Department of City and Regional Planning (nowadays of Urban Studies and Planning) offered him a teaching post, since it needed new staff to cover the increasing demand for such programmes. Lynch joined MIT in 1948, and began a line of research into the form and visual environment of cities, aided by collaboration from his students in seminars and fieldwork.
The aims of this work were too ambiguous and were hard to develop, since Lynch was trying to cover a vast spectrum of topics aimed at achieving an in-depth knowledge of a city. However, from the very first drafts still extant of this potential research programme it is possible to pick out what would be the main thrust of study. It would be a question of assessing the degree of satisfaction or well-being of individuals relative to the visual qualities of urban forms, and investigating how different forms had satisfied these demands over the course of history [5].
In the academic year 1952 to 1953 Lynch was able to try out many of his ideas while living in Florence, thanks to a grant from the Ford Foundation that permitted him to visit other cities during his stay: Venice, Rome, Pisa, Lucca, Siena and Bologna. His notebooks show his interest in analysing in detail the mode of life of average dwellers in a city, how such people live and utilize their public spaces, how they move from place to place, how they find their way and enjoy their surroundings, along with other similar features. The contrast between Florencia and the bland environments where he had resided during his youth in Chicago left a lasting impression on him, as would emerge from his later works.
Hence, it was in Florence and other Italian cities that Lynch came to appreciate what he later termed *a good city form*. A city having a distinctive character with which citizens can identify; showing great vitality, since it permits a variety of functions; with a clear structure that is at once inclusive and complex; easy to get around, because it has recognizable visual form, routes and access paths. All of this is covered

by an unpublished text, written on his return from Italy, entitled *Notes on City Satisfaction*. In this many of the intuitions that were to appear in *The Image of the City* may already be seen. Consequently, it is possible to state that the ideas about *legibility*, *imageability*, *structure*, and *identity* of cities, as perceived by city-dwellers, were forged during his stay in Tuscany.
According to his students, Lynch came back completely changed and with a clear framework for later research work. As often happens in the intellectual trajectory of many scholars, these early studies were to mark all of his later career as a researcher, so that the same set of ideas were to appear developed in one way or another in his books.

The Perceptual Form of the City

In late 1953, György Kepes and Kevin Lynch, the first lecturing in *Visual Design* and the other in *City Planning*, put forward a project for research into *The Perceptual Form of the City* to the Rockefeller Foundation [6]. They were given a grant for this in April 1954, to run over three academic years. In the end, the project continued for a further two, despite no further funding being provided, from 1954 to June 1959.
It should be remembered that after the Second World War quite a number of European academics with strong interests in psychology emigrated to the United States. The consequence was that analyses with the starting point of visual perception became commonplace in many disciplines, giving rise to widely circulated books, such as *Language of Vision* by György Kepes [Kepes 1944], *Vision in Motion* by László Moholy-Nagy [Moholy-Nagy 1947], Art and *Visual Perception* by Rudolf Arnheim [Arnheim 1954], or *Meaning in Visual Arts* by Erwin Panofsky [Panofsky 1955].
The Rockefeller Foundation had just approved a new line of research into Urban Design Studies, within its section for studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences. The main aim of this new programme was to contribute to the development of the new discipline of Urban Design, bringing together aspects hitherto unrelated within the professional practice of Architecture, City Planning and Landscape Design. This was a reaction to the increasingly discredited theories of urban design adopted during the decades prior to the Second World War and thereafter. These had been applied with disastrous results in plans for inner reconstruction of many American cities, which had been carried out on the basis of what a few years later was to be termed *ingenuous functionalism*. This gave pride of place to travel by car, zoning for a diversity of uses, health and hygiene, economics and other purely technical factors [7].
The documents preserved in the MIT archives show that Kevin Lynch was the prime mover in the research work, whilst Kepes, having many other commitments, played a more secondary role, on the lines of a consultant. For instance, it was Lynch who drew up the long *Progress Report and Plan for Future Studies* dated June 1955. He first sent this for assessment to Kepes, who returned it at the end of the month with several valuable suggestions, some of which were to be decisive in shaping the development of the work by Lynch.
In April 1959 Lynch drew up a final report, twelve pages long, for the research project, entitled *Summary of Accomplishments*. In this he explained the results achieved, initial objectives that had been abandoned for various reasons, and others that had still not been attained, but which should continue to be a topic for study. Among the achievements, he listed the following three: "A comparative analysis of the visual form of various city areas. An understanding of the perceptual effects of the city, and of the individual's psychological orientation to his environment. The development of analytical tools for examining the urban visual scene, as well as techniques for use in urban design." [Lynch 1959b] [8]
As specific results of his research, Lynch included his articles *Some Childhood Memories of the City* [Lukashok, Lynch 1956] and *A Walk around the Block* [Lynch 1959a], as well as appending a typescript thirty-nine pages long entitled *The Image of the City*, composed in February 1958. He stated that this was a summary of the major questions on orientation in cities, to be published in a more extensive version by the end of the year by the MIT Press. This indeed happened, as the preface of the book is dated December 1959.
The final report mentions other matters arising from the project, relating to the perception of visual sequences and the communication of meaning in a cityscape, whether intentional meanings or deeper senses. Lynch states that Professor Kepes would continue looking into these questions.
All of this goes to confirm that the greater part of the conclusions drawn from the project are due to Lynch, and that *The Image of the City* should be considered his work entirely. This is despite the fact that in the book's preface Lynch wrote that alongside his name on the cover there should also be written that of György Kepes. These words must be understood as an elegant gesture of academic generosity.

The Image of the Physical Urban Environment

There are certain intuitions in Lynch's book that seem to lie at the heart of his thinking and relate to two basic features of visual perception of urban surroundings: orientation and the reduction of complexity to simple, comprehensible schemes [9]. In the final version of the book these questions lose a little of their relevance through turning into legibility, imageability and mental maps. Without any attempt at summarizing the content of the book, some of the ideas that are of lasting value will be discussed below.

In view of the fundamental principle of the degree of satisfaction received from cities (one of the concepts most often repeated in Lynch's early works), the main criterion for recognizing a city with a "good form" would be the ease with which it is possible to find one's way about it. Orientation, the feasibility of recognizing places and one's situation within them, not only offers the deep satisfaction arising from a feeling of security, but also gives a sense of belonging, of roots and identity.

A city, or a recognizable part of a city, should have a clear and legible shape, which those living there can perceive from a scheme of orientation that is very simple in its origins. It begins with the easiness of finding routes and knowing one's way from one place to another. However, it should be capable of enrichment as time goes by, yielding an image or mental map of the locality that is ever more structured. As Lynch wrote at the end of the central chapter in his book: "We are continuously engaged in the attempt to organize our surroundings, to structure and identify them. Various environments are more or less amenable to such treatment. When reshaping cities it should be possible to give them a form which facilitates these organizing efforts rather than frustrates them." [Lynch 1960, p. 91]

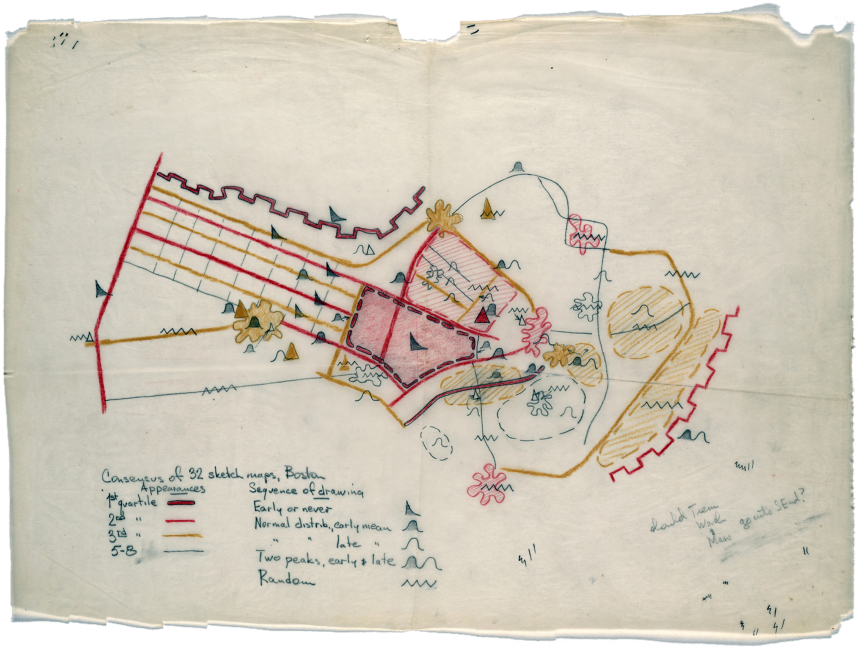
When these qualities are attained, it becomes possible to speak of a sense of place, or of familiarity with a location. This is because residents can clearly identify the image or physical structure of their surroundings, and can perceive differences between this image and that of other cities. In brief, a city with a clear structure and its own identity favours the emotional well-being of those who dwell there and allows them to anchor in it meanings, stories, recollections and experiences.

Cities that are bland and colourless by reason of their urban layout, or amorphous cities, in other words those lacking a recognizable shape, impede orientation and cause profound disquiet, dissatisfaction and lack of roots. This is because they make it hard to organize, structure and identify the urban surroundings and consequently hinder the building up of a coherent mental map from perceptions. Likewise, a city with an excessively ordered and monotonous pattern or design may be dull and boring, curbing the faculty of perception and making it difficult to form a suitable mental image of them.

Thus, a good urban form should be varied, complex, capable of incorporating zones differing strongly one from another into an easily identifiable structure. More than orderliness, what a city needs is a good organization of complexity, interconnecting disparate parts and unresolved zones. In Lynch's words: "True enough, we need an environment which is not simply well organized, but poetic and symbolic as well. It should speak of the individuals and their complex society, of their aspirations and their historical tradition, of the natural setting, and of the complicated functions and movements of the city world. But clarity of structure and vividness of identity are first steps to the development of strong symbols. By appearing as a remarkable and well-knit *place*, the city could provide a ground for the clustering and organization of these meanings and associations. Such a sense of place in itself enhances every human activity that occurs there, and encourages the deposit of a memory trace." [Lynch 1960, p. 119]

Although the perception of an urban image is a subjective act, in his surveys and interviews Lynch was able to demonstrate that sets of city-dwellers, belonging to a given homogeneous group, coming from the same part of town, and so forth, have a pretty coherent image or mental map of their city, with many features in common (fig. 3). They recognize the main routes, borders, focal points, different zones, and the like. This collective mental image of a city (or part of a city), which has an impact on urban dwellers' sensations of emotional well-being or unease, is what Lynch addressed in his book. It is one that should interest any town-planner having the intention of intervening in, or modifying, any given place by reinforcing its image. In the second chapter of *The Image of the City* he put these ideas to the test by analysing the images or mental maps of Boston, Los Angeles, and Jersey City.

On the basis of this study, Lynch proposed five elements by means of which it is possible to structure the image of a city and give a shape to



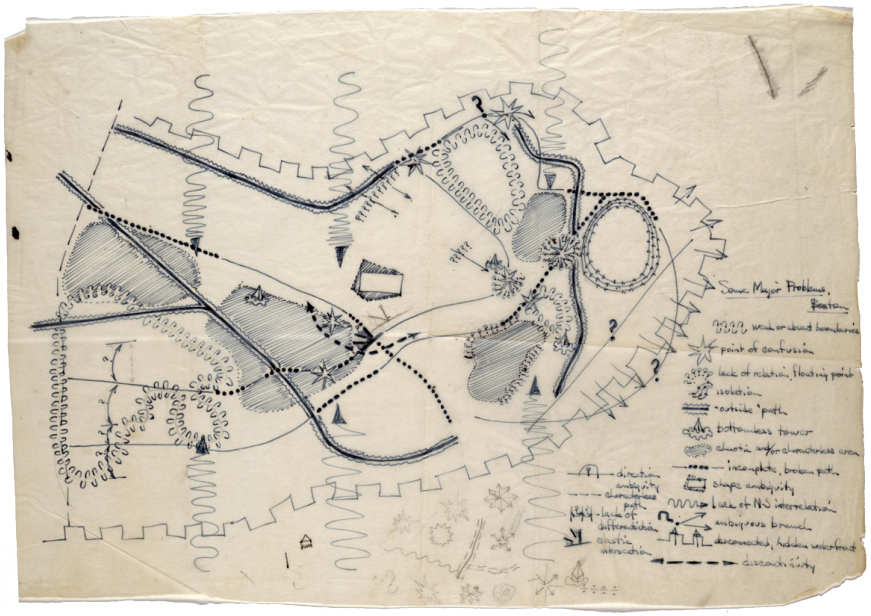


Fig. 3. Kevin Lynch, Consensus of 32 sketch maps of Boston, 1959 (MIT Institute Archives, MC 208, Box 6).

Fig. 4. Kevin Lynch, Some major problems of Boston, 1959 (MIT Institute Archives, MC 208, Box 6).

the mental maps going to make it up: *paths*, *edges*, *districts*, *nodes*, and *landmarks*. These are five elements that will appear in any description of the image of a city or a pathway through it. The importance of these elements for an urban designer is that they can be specified in easily understood diagrams, as may be seen from the sketch plans drawn up by Lynch after these surveys and interviews (fig. 4).
In 1984 Kevin Lynch published his article *Reconsidering the Image of the City* [Lynch 1984]. In this he noted how the five elements used to specify and explain the image of a city had been welcomed by urban designers and by academics. However, this was not the case for the working method he had prosed, based on surveys and interviews of residents of the place concerned. Carrying out this sort of work to obtain a map or mental image from residents is without doubt a long and laborious task. More than this, though, in most cases those involved in projects for urban renewal had no wish for the townspeople to take any part in what they were doing [10].
To end this review of the book *The Image of the City*, it is worth recalling once more that at its origin, and in Kevin Lynch's later academic career, the emotional impact of having lived a year in Florence can be clearly felt. In the fourth chapter of the book, which covers the form of a city, Lynch goes at some length into an explanation of the unique qualities of the image of Florence: "To take a single

example, Florence is a city of powerful character which has deep hold on the affection of many people [...]. To live in this environment, whatever the economic or social problems encountered, seems to add an extra depth to experience, whether of delight or of melancholy or of belonging [...]. But it is also a highly visible city. It lies in a bowl of hills along the Arno River, so that the hills and the city are almost always intervisible. On the south, the open country penetrates almost to the heart of the city, setting up a clear contrast, and from one of the last steep hills a terrace gives an 'overhead' view of the urban core. On the north, small distinct settlements, such as Fiesole and Settignano, are perched visibly on characteristic hills. From the precise symbolic and transportation center of the city rises the huge and unmistakable dome of the Duomo, flanked by Giotto's campanile, a point of orientation visible in every section of the city and for miles outside of it. This dome is the symbol of Florence. The central city has district characters of almost oppressive strength [...]. Within this area are many strong nodes, whose distinctive forms are reinforced by their special use or class of user. The central area is studded with landmarks, each with its own name and story. The Arno River cuts through the whole and connects it to the larger landscape. To these clear and differentiated forms people have made strong attachments, whether of past history or of their own experience. Every scene is instantly recognizable, and brings to mind a flood of associations. Part fits into part. The visual environment becomes an integral piece of its inhabitants' lives. The city is by no means perfect, even in the limited sense of imageability; nor does all of the city's visual success lie in this one quality. But there seems to be a simple and automatic pleasure, a feeling of satisfaction, presence, and Tightness, which arises from the mere sight of the city, or the chance to walk through its streets." [Lynch 1960, p. 92]

To the memory of Professor Vito Cardone

Notes

[1] I wish to express my sincere thanks to Juan Luis de las Rivas Sanz, Professor of Town-Planning at the University of Valladolid, for all the assistance he generously gave while I was writing this paper. My thanks also go to the late Professor Vito Cardone who with his habitual enthusiasm commissioned this text from me for the journal *diségno* in September 2018.

[2] His initial idea of "serial vision" is probably one of his most valuable contributions. It has become a powerful tool for analysing cities.

[3] *The Townscape Movement* began in December 1949 with an article, *Townscape*, by the journal's editor, Hubert de Cronin Hastings, under the pen name Ivor de Wolfe [De Wolfe 1949]. This was followed by Gordon Cullen's article *Townscape Casebook* [Cullen 1949].

[4] José Luis Sert was the Dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Design, where he set up the first university degree programme in Urban Design. It is often claimed that the 1956 Conference was the moment at which urban design became an academic discipline; this is why the consolidation of this expression is attributed to J.L. Sert. However, in Great Britain the phrase "urban design" had already been used by P. Abercrombie and F. Gibberd. Even before this, it had been in use as a more or less generic term; for example, Gibberd had given his famous 1953 manual the title *Town Design* [Gibberd 1953].

[5] Various drafts of his proposals are held at the MIT Libraries: *A study on the visual forms of cities* [Lynch 1951], *Research in city form* [Lynch 1953a].

[6] This is the *Research Proposal* dated 4 December 1953 held in the MIT archives [Lynch 1953b], Lynch was always keen for his work to have a scientific basis, as was normal in Social Science studies. He was attracted by possible applications of psychology in assessing the visual impact of a city on individuals, consulting his academic colleague György Kepes on this point.

[7] The expression *funzionalismo ingenuo* (ingenuous functionalism) was used by Aldo Rossi [Rossi 1966].

[8] See *Kevin Lynch's papers* at the MIT Libraries Archives, MC 208, Box 1, General Statements [Lynch 1959b].

[9] This is not the point at which to look at the more original aspects of Lynch's research relative to theories on town-planning that had been built up since the beginning of the century. For this purpose it is advisable to consult the Raynsford's contribution on the topic [Raynsford 2011].

[10] Nowadays a great deal more importance is attached to participation by city-dwellers, and Lynch's method is indeed used in a good many town-planning exercises. The same has happened, for example, to the idea of a language of patterns put forward by Christopher Alexander and his colleagues [Alexander et al. 1977], which for a long while was ignored by planners.

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