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"The City Image and Its Elements"
from The Image of the City (1960)

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 public 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 to 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.

[...]

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... 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 by the observer. They are the 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 traveling. 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 the 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 a symbol. They may be called cores. Many nodes, of course, partake of the nature of both junctions and concentrations. The concept of node is related to the concept of path, since...
PATHS

For most people interviewed, paths were the predominant city elements, although their importance varied according to the degree of familiarity with the city. People with the least knowledge of Boston tended to think of the city in terms of topography, large regions, generalized characteristics, and broad directional relationships. Subjects who knew the city better had usually mastered parts of the path structure; these people thought more in terms of specific paths and their interrelationships. A tendency also appeared for the people who knew the city best of all to rely more upon small landmarks and less upon either regions or paths.

The potential drama and identification in the highway system should not be underestimated.

One Jersey City subject, who can find little worth describing in her surroundings, suddenly lit up when she described the Holland Tunnel. Another recounted her pleasure:

You cross Baldwin Avenue, you see all of New York in front of you, you see the terrific drop of land [the Palisades] ... and here’s this open panorama of Lower Jersey City in front of you and you’re going downhill, and there you know: there’s the tunnel, there’s the Hudson River and everything ... I always look to the right to see if I can see the ... Statue of Liberty ... Then I always look up to see the Empire State Building, see how the weather is ... I have a real feeling of happiness because I’m going somewhere, and I love to go places.

Concentration of special use or activity along a street may give it prominence in the minds of observers. Washington Street in Boston is the outstanding Boston example: subjects consistently associated it with shopping and theaters ... People seemed to be sensitive to variations in the amount of activity they encountered and sometimes guided themselves largely by following the main stream of traffic. Los Angeles’ Broadway was recognized by its crowds and its street cars; Washington Street in Boston was marked by a torrent of pedestrians. Other kinds of activity at ground level also seemed to make places memorable, such as construction work near South Station, or the hustle of the food markets.

Characteristic spatial qualities were able to strengthen the image of particular paths. In the simplest sense, streets that suggest extremes of either width or narrowness attracted attention.

Where major paths lacked identity, or were easily confused one for the other, the entire city image was in difficulty ... Boston’s Longfellow Bridge was not infrequently confused with the Charles River Dam, probably since both carry transit lines and terminate in traffic nodes ... People tended to think of path destinations and origin points: they liked to know where paths came from and where they led. Paths with clear and well-known origins and destinations had stronger identities, helped tie the city together, and gave the observer a sense of his bearings whenever he crossed them. Some subjects thought of general destinations for paths, to a section of the city, for example, while others thought of specific places. One person, who made rather high demands for intelligibility upon the city environment, was troubled because he saw a set of railroad tracks, and did not know the destination of trains using them.

EDGES

Edges are the linear elements not considered as paths: they are usually, but not quite always, the boundaries between two kinds of areas. They act as lateral references. They are strong in Boston and Jersey City but weaker in Los Angeles. Those edges seem strongest which are not only visually prominent, but also continuous in form and impenetrable to cross movement. The Charles River in Boston is the best example and has all of these qualities.

It is difficult to think of Chicago without picturing Lake Michigan. It would be interesting to see how many Chicagoans would begin to draw a map of their city by putting down something other than the line of the lake shore. Here is a magnificent example of a visible edge, gigantic in scale, that exposes an entire metropolis to view. Great buildings, parks, and tiny private beaches all come down to the water’s edge, which throughout most of its length is accessible and visible to all. The contrast, the differentiation of events along the line, and the lateral breadth are all very strong. The effect is reinforced by the concentration of paths and activities along its extent. The scale is perhaps unexpectedly large and coarse, and too much open space is at times interposed between city and water, as at the Loop. Yet the facade of Chicago on the lake is an unforgettable sight.

DISTRICTS

Districts are the relatively large city areas which the observer can mentally go inside of, and which have some common character. They can be recognized internally, and occasionally can be used as external reference as a person goes by or toward them. Many persons interviewed took care to point out that Boston, while confusing in its path pattern even to the experienced inhabitant, has, in the number and vividness of its differentiated districts, a quality that quite makes up for it. As one person put it: “Each part of Boston is different from the other. You can tell pretty much what area you’re in.”

Subjects, when asked which city they felt to be a well-oriented one, mentioned several, but New York (meaning Manhattan) was unanimously cited. And this city was cited not so much for its grid, which Los Angeles has as well, but because it has a number of well-defined characteristic districts, set in an ordered frame of rivers and streets. Two Los Angeles subjects even referred to Manhattan as being “small” in comparison to their central area! Concepts of size may depend in part on how well a structure can be grasped.

Usually the typical features were imaged and recognized in a characteristic cluster, the thematic unit. The Beacon Hill image, for example, included steep narrow streets; old brick row houses of intimate scale; inset, highly
maintained, white doorways; black trim; cobblestones and brick walks; quiet; and upper-
class pedestrians. The resulting thematic unit was distinctive by contrast to the rest of the city
and could be recognized immediately.

LANDMARKS

Landmarks, the point reference considered to be
external to the observer, are simple physical
elements which may vary widely in scale. There
seemed to be a tendency for those more familiar
with a city to rely increasingly on systems of
landmarks for their guides—to enjoy uniqueness
and specialization, in place of the continuity
used earlier.

Since the use of landmarks involves the
singling out of one element from a host of
possibilities, the key physical characteristic of
this class is singularity, some aspect that is
unique or memorable in the context. Land-
marks become more easily identifiable, more
likely to be chosen as significant, if they have a
clear form; if they contrast with the back-
ground; and if there is some prominence of
spatial location. Figure-background contrast
seems to be the principal factor. The back-
ground against which an element stands out
need not be limited to immediate surroundings:
the grasshopper weathervane of Faneuil Hall,
the gold dome of the State House, or the peak of
the Los Angeles City Hall are landmarks that
are unique against the background of the entire
city.

[...]