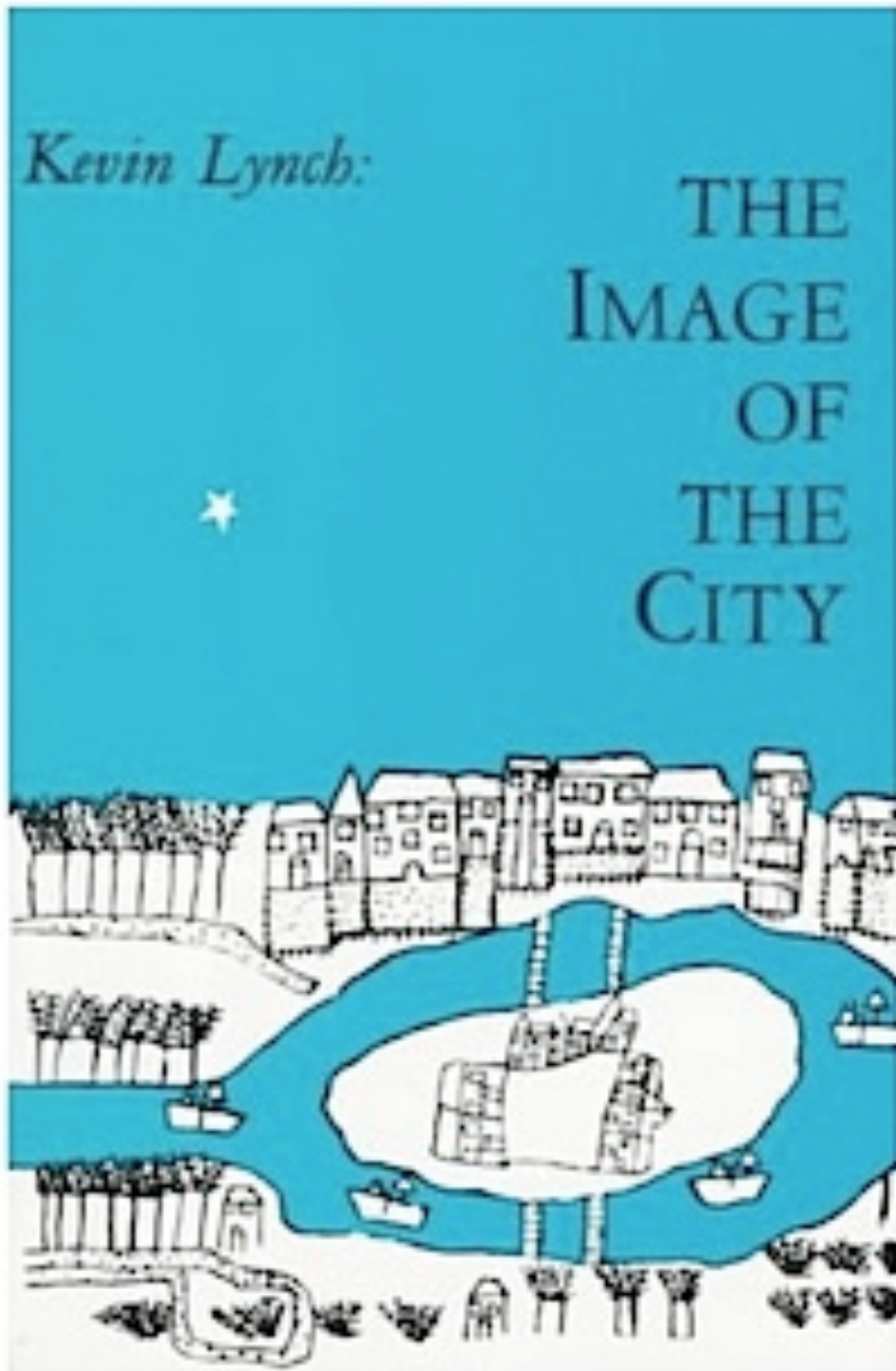


Kevin Lynch – The Image of the City

Summary by **Michiel de Lange**, may 2009, the mobile city



As part of a new effort of The Mobile City to compile an ever-expanding **overview of literature** relevant to our themes, I will review this oldie-goldie published in 1960. I particularly assess its enduring relevance for understanding the current relation between mobile & locative media and the city.

In this book, Lynch argues that people in urban situations orient themselves by means of mental maps. He compares three American cities (Boston, Jersey City, and Los Angeles) and looks at how people orient themselves in these cities. A central notion in this book is that of *legibility* (also called *imageability* and *visibility*). Legibility means the extent to which the cityscape can be 'read'. People who move through the city engage in way-finding. They need to be able to recognize and organize urban elements into a coherent pattern. "In the process of way-finding, the strategic link is the environmental image, the generalized mental picture of the exterior physical world that is held by an individual. This image is the product both of immediate sensation and of the memory of past experience, and it is used to interpret information and to guide action" (p.4). Lynch proposes that these mental maps consist of five elements: (1) *paths*: routes along which people move throughout the city; (2) *edges*: boundaries and breaks in continuity; (3) *districts*: areas characterized by common characteristics; (4) *nodes*: strategic focus points for orientation like squares and junctions; and (5) *landmarks*: external points of orientation, usually a easily identifiable physical object in the urban landscape. Of these five elements, paths are especially important according Lynch, since these organize urban mobility.

A clear mental map of the urban environment is needed to counter the always looming fear of disorientation. A legible mental map gives people an important sense of emotional security, it is the framework for communication and conceptual organization, and heightens the depth and intensity of everyday human experience. The city itself is thus a powerful symbol of a complex society, argues Lynch. An environmental image has three components: identity (the recognition of urban elements as separate entities), structure (the relation of urban elements to other objects and to the observer), and meaning (its practical and emotional value to the observer). It is important that these urban elements are not hermetically designed into precise and final detail but present an open-ended order. Urban inhabitants should be able to actively form their own stories and create new activities. Lynch presents his work as an agenda for urban designers. They should design the city in such a way that it gives room for three related 'movements': mapping, learning, shaping. First, people should be able to acquire a clear mental map of their urban environment. Second, people should be able to learn how to navigate in this environment by training. Third, people must be able to operate and act upon their environment.

In my view this book is an incredible valuable work to understand how people

perceive, inhabit and move around in the urban landscape. It shows that urban space is not just composed of its physical characteristics but equally by representations in mental images. Mobility is not just (the potential for) free-flowing movement but heavily relies on structuring and identifying the environment through the aid of mental maps. Lynch' work has been influential to many. Theorist of postmodernity Fredric Jameson (1991) for instance **refers to Lynch** when he argues that the cognitive map is a means to cope with societies complexities by bridging 'objective' and abstract representations of space, and subjective existential experiences of 'lived space'. Lynch can also be seen as a precursor to the influential thesis by Henri Lefebvre from 1974 that space is not just 'out there' as a mathematical entity or *a priori* category but always socially produced. Lynch' work has many implications for urban design and raises various questions about the present role of mobile and locative media technologies in the urban context.

One such question is the extend to which our way-finding shifts from orienting ourselves to mostly 'objective' urban elements to become increasingly subjective by means of locative media technologies. We are far more able than ever before to "write" the city with our own subjective experiences and share these with other people through mobile media. A **recent post** by Martijn de Waal discusses this issue of 'semantic way-finding'. The element of visibility is crucial here. Lynch is talking about elements of the city that are publicly visible to all people. But what happens when people increasingly rely on private and idiosyncratic points of orientation through their portable devices? Locative media add invisible layers of social meanings to the city that are only visible through a different interface (the mobile screen), accessible to others elsewhere, although often only to those who are members of that service or community. What does this mean for notions of general legibility, the public and private character of mental images, and social inclusion/exclusion?

In addition, Lynch' emphasis on clear legibility of the urban environment poses some critical questions about the current tendency to saturate the urban landscape with information. What happens to the overall legibility of the city when every building, object, and place wants to communicate and announce its existence to us by yelling "I Am Here, Look At Me!"? To what extend will mobile and locative devices come to act as filters for coping with the torrent of information, or actually become part of the problem itself?

Another issue brought up by Lynch' work is the eternal question of (the end of) *serendipity*, so often discussed in relation to mobile media and location-based services. Are locative services undermining the potential for exploration and unexpected encounters with new places and people, when our movements are guided and goal-oriented? Lynch himself feels that disorientation is the cause of fear and anxiety, and already claims that "[t]o become completely lost is perhaps a rather rare experience for most people in the modern city" (p.

4). Yet under controlled circumstances he acknowledges that “there is some value in mystification, labyrinth, or surprise in the environment” (p. 5).

Lynch work also introduces a question that is especially relevant nowadays. Is our capacity for orientation and way-finding something we learn (and thus can unlearn as well when we externalize this to our GPS navigation devices, see earlier posts on this blog [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)), or is it innate to people as well as **other animals**? Lynch takes a clear stance when he says “it now seems unlikely that there is any mystic “instinct” of way-finding” (p. 3), but that seems to be countered by recent biological evidence about for instance bird migrations.

Finally, some more critical remarks. Lynch primarily emphasizes the role of the visual sense. He says how people find their way in the city by relying on vision. Other faculties such as hearing and even smelling are lacking in his work. Some later authors have stressed the role of sound in experiencing the city (e.g. Paul DuGay about the Walkman; Michael Bull about the mobile phone as an audio device; Caroline Basset, and De Jong & Schuilenburg in a **special issue of Open Magazine** about sound). A related omission in Lynch’ analysis of the urban experience is the role of media in general and text in particular. This is odd since Lynch so prominently uses the term *legibility* in his work. Of course it could be countered that media did not play such a big role in the urban context at the time of writing of this book (1960) but this misses the point that cities from their inception have been inscribed by signs and media, as Malcolm McCullough so clearly **demonstrated in his keynote speech** at The Mobile City 2008. An early modern writer such as Walter Benjamin for instance already looks at the relation between print media and the city, and emphasizes that the modern city is increasingly being dominated by “script-images”. “Script – having found, in the book, a refuge in which it can lead an autonomous existence – is pitilessly dragged out into the street by advertisements and subjected to the brutal heteronomies of economic chaos”, he says in an essay called “Attested Auditor of Books”.

Still, “The Image of the City” is a classic work and can be reread as a fresh work in this age. Lynch’ division of mapping/learning/shaping can well be applied as important questions that can be posed for each locative media project. To what extend do locative media accurately or insightfully map our (experience of) environment? To what extend do locative media teach us to see and experience our environment? To what extend do locative media enable us to shape and modify our environment?

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