

## **Lawrence Vale and Sam Bass Warner, Jr.**

### ***City-Imaging After Lynch***

Nearly forty years after the publication of Kevin Lynch's landmark volume, *The Image of the City* (1960), city design and development practitioners still grapple with ways to measure and nurture "good city form." [1] Lynch's early work emphasized the perceptual characteristics of the urban environment, stressing the ways that individuals mentally organize their own sensory experience of cities. Increasingly, however, city imaging is supplemented and constructed by exposure to visual media, rather than by direct sense experience of urban realms. In the "hyper-visual"[2] contemporary city, the whole question of city image and city imaging warrants renewed scrutiny. Lynch's famous study deliberately de-emphasized the *meanings* that places hold for their inhabitants, yet this aspect remains central.[3] City images are not static, but subject to constant revision and manipulation by a variety of media-savvy individuals and institutions. In recent years, urban designers (and others) have used the idea of city image proactively-- seeking innovative ways to alter perceptions of urban, suburban, and regional areas.

The word *image* can mean many things. An image can be a physical likeness, and it can be a mental representation, or even a symbolic and metaphorical embodiment. The term *imaging* as it is understood here involves actors and actions concerned with transforming all of these kinds of meanings. City imaging, in this sense, is the process of constructing visually-based narratives about the potential of places. This media-enriched image-building process involves not only place-based and form-based visions but also strategies for economic opportunity and environmental stewardship. Place promotion transcends economics-grounded efforts to attract new investment; it is also a strategy for reinforcing (or reconstructing) city image. As such, it always matters who builds these images, for which reasons, and for whom. Image-building efforts encompass not only changes to the built environment but also encode broad conceptual orientations; image-making is about finding new ways (and new technologies) to represent and promote cleaner environments, better communities, and socio-economic progress, yet images may also serve to mask or perpetuate existing inequalities. Images may be promoted in service of some broad "public good," but they are also subject to extreme manipulation by market forces that resist any such wider efforts to plan. As Ward and Gold put it,

Economic instability, restructuring and an acceleration of the international mobility of capital have caused many regions to lose the traditional sources of employment that gave them their primary identity. At the same time, individual national governments have retreated from their former interventionist strategies. Taken together, these forces have fragmented the traditional planning approach as the main agency shaping and managing the processes of spatial change and left a vacant policy niche within which local promotional activity has flowered (Ward and Gold, 1994, p. 8).

This "policy niche" provides many opportunities for urban designers who, together with media professionals, are devising new ways to change public attitudes toward urban places.

The 1998 DUSP Faculty Colloquium examines emerging directions for city imaging, issues that seem to bridge the concerns of physical planners, media professionals, and city developers in ways that affect planning practice throughout the United States and abroad. If the imaging (and re-imaging) of districts, cities, and regions is indeed at the heart of contemporary urban development practice, it is essential that urban designers and planners understand the phenomenon. Only then will they be able to work more effectively within its constraints or to devise alternative frameworks.

## **Constructing Urban Identity**

In recent years, there has been a growing acknowledgment of the ways that the media and the built environment work together to shape and alter public perceptions of places.[4] For decades, urban sociologists have noted how community identity is socially constructed not only by local residents but also by a wide variety of outsiders, including newspaper reporters and editors, civic boosters, developers, realtors, marketing firms, and city officials (Janowitz, 1952; Suttles, 1972; Weiss, 1987). Such castings and portrayals can have both positive and negative connotations. Sometimes, as is vividly conveyed in Mike Davis' (1992) account of the contradictions of twentieth century Los Angeles, the mythmaking of the boosters has its own darker counterpart vying to capture the public imagination. While some critics, such as Michael Sorkin, may regard L.A. as "...the most mediated town in America, nearly unviewable save through the fictive eyes of its mythologizers" (cited in Davis, 1992, p. 20), Los Angeles is hardly alone. All cities, and the neighborhoods within them, are constructed and interpreted by many forces; we learn about places not only from the people who live in them but also from the built environment in which social life takes place and from the media environment (including the reportage of "pseudo-events"[5]) that helps to edit and alter our perceptions.

Media portrayals and urban development ventures each make judgments about the worth and potential of people and the places they inhabit. For example, Hollywood producers and directors seek out distressed urban communities from South Central Los Angeles to Detroit to set their nightmarish portrayals of inner city life, images that often serve to confirm or extend negative stereotypes. On television, the situation seems similar, although exceptions such as MTV's "The Real World" annually seek out urban settings intended to forge the very definition of what's *cool*. Still, the most popular television dramas focus on inner-city crime-fighting or chronicle the 'incoming wounded' of urban emergency rooms. Even the 1990s spate of urban TV comedies, epitomized by the nine-year run of "Seinfeld," tend to confirm stereotypes of "a vibrant city that is quirky and diverse but not very nice" (Grunwald, 1997).

The metro-media nexus occurs not only within the realms of film and television (not to mention older media forms); increasingly, urban images are conveyed through newer digital media. Popular computer-based games such as Simcity 2000 provide participants to direct the development of a metropolis, and encode a myriad of assumptions about how cities can be structured. Other alternative cyberworlds, also use physical cities as metaphors for creating new interactive social realms that allow those with computers to experience urbanism-at-a-distance.

Even as new communications technologies mediate the experience of the city through the creation of parallel fictional worlds, city imaging efforts also continue to thrive in the built world of urban real estate development. Here, too, the old values of "location, location, location" that drive urban redevelopment initiatives have gained new media partners. Increasingly, flagship development projects take on the trappings of staged ventures, in which image-building is at the head of the agenda.

In the effort to shift and lift public (or investor) confidence, places get named or re-named to convey future hopes-- as with Detroit's Renaissance Center-- or to convey a more upscale or pastoral image. This is not a new phenomenon, but it is one that seems to be diversifying and accelerating. At mid-century, tenements and slums were replaced by public housing projects with names like "Orchard Park" and "Elm Haven;" in the late 1990s, many failed housing projects are themselves being torn-down and rebuilt as New Urbanist mixed-income communities, again with new identities and new names, not to mention new glossy brochures and promotional videos. Baltimore's notorious Lafayette Courts project is reimagined as Pleasant View Gardens; Atlanta replaces Techwood Homes with Centennial Place; Chicago tries to bury the infamy of Cabrini-Green in a billion dollar new neighborhood.[6] Similar re-imaging occurs in other parts of American cities: now-seedy areas get recast as Arts Districts, and abandoned 19th century industrial landscapes become resuscitated as centers of Heritage Interpretation, Historic Preservation, and (it is hoped) Economic Development.

Twenty-five years ago, Kevin Lynch called on designers and planners to help city officials and city dwellers develop a clearer sense of the passage of time in urban areas. Now, however, his intriguing question "What Time is This Place?" (Lynch, 1972) is being answered by calculated efforts to select and highlight certain past eras of the city's culture and ambiance, while bypassing less marketable elements, periods (and persons)[7]. Everything from the streetscape and the architecture of new and renovated facilities to the typeface of tourist brochures and signage attempts to recapture a lost piece of heritage in a way intended to portend a new post-industrial economic viability. Redevelopers of Tampa's Ybor City, for example, seek to attract tourists and reinvestment dollars by harkening back to the late 19th century days when the neighborhood marked the global center of cigar manufacturing and served as a nexus for Italian, Cuban, and Spanish immigrant culture-- even though the neighborhood is now home to a predominantly African-American population.

Re-imaging also occurs at the level of the city as a whole. Places such as Pittsburgh and Cleveland-- not long ago widely stereotyped as the epitome of 'rust belt' decline, are now

re-interpreted as the poster children of rust belt renaissance. To accomplish this image change, city leaders have long recognized that tangible evidence of economic growth is not sufficient; what matters is both high profile physical redevelopment and the skillful marketing of such efforts at visible change. The New Cleveland Campaign, for instance, is premised on equal doses of urban development and public relations. Other cities, in the United States and elsewhere, stage elaborate promotional campaigns in the attempt to attract national and international events such as major conventions or the Olympic Games.

In many places, the process of image making has extended beyond city limits to encompass the broader regions in which metropolitan homes and workplaces are increasingly found. In Lynch's terms, this is about "managing the sense of a region," in ways that enable residents to identify-- and to identify with-- a wider set of jurisdictions (Lynch, 1976). Progress on regional image-making has been sporadic and slow, especially in areas of high racial and ethnic spatial polarity between inner city and outer suburbs. For every vague notion of "Chicagoland," there are many cities where personal identification ends strictly at the city line. Still, there are more promising counter-trends, from Portland Metro-- where regional government and ecologically-sensitive management seem to have made significant gains-- to the burgeoning rails-to-trails open-space networks that cut across political jurisdictions in regions throughout the United States.

### **Assessing the Images and the Image-Makers**

Most of those who have begun the assessment of re-imaging efforts have attacked them as superficial and divisive, yielding Disneyfied cities that are more racially and economically polarized than ever before. Such critics-- typified by those who contributed to Michael Sorkin's edited collection of essays entitled *Variations on a Theme Park* (1992)-- have bemoaned what they see as the 'privatization of public space,' a trend seen as permitting enhanced surveillance and fortress-like urban design.

Cultural geographers in Britain and Europe (with minimal participation by American colleagues) have contributed recent volumes with titles such as *Selling the City: Marketing Approaches in Public Sector Urban Planning* (Ashworth and Voogd, 1990); *Selling Places: The City as Cultural Capital, Past and Present* (Kearns and Philo, eds., 1993); *Place Promotion: The Use of Publicity and Marketing to Sell Towns and Regions* (Gold and Ward, eds., 1994); *Marketing the City: The Role of Flagship Developments in Urban Regeneration* (Smyth, 1994); and-- perhaps most provocatively-- *Reimagining the Pariah City: Urban Development in Belfast and Detroit*. (Neill and Fitzsimmons, 1995).[8] At the still broader locus of nations and nationalism, too, architecture and urban design have regularly been used in the service of promoting the preferred self-image of powerful persons and institutions. Whether through efforts to consolidate colonial rule or through post-colonial attempts to forge group-based identities through the design and

construction of new capital cities and parliamentary districts, image-making has been a central aspect of city-making (AlSayyad, 1992; Vale, 1992; Wright, 1991).

At all scales, then-- from the local to the international-- the image-making process seems ubiquitous and complex. Most academic critics have tended to see all such efforts as uniformly nefarious; *selling* anything is equivalent to *selling out*. They see these attempts at constructing new group identities as serving the interests of dominant groups, while further marginalizing all others. Yet, it is far from clear that the broad brush critique yields a wholly satisfactory picture. If "imaging the city" is indeed the ascendant mode of design and development we have, then it behooves designers, planners, and city leaders to understand how it works, and how it can be improved or, if necessary, superseded.

## **New Directions for Imaging Cities**

It is possible to characterize and categorize the range of city-imaging efforts currently underway in many different ways. One could, for instance, group them according to specific project types-- housing, retail, industry, institutions, parks, and the like. This classification, however, masks the renewed emphasis on mixed-use efforts, does little justice to the complex urban qualities of vibrant neighborhoods, and contributes little to understanding why certain kinds of development are happening in specific districts at this specific historical moment. It seems more pertinent to begin by identifying the types of districts where globally-rooted structural changes in the urban economy have created both the necessity and the opportunity for large-scale change (King, ed., 1996). At the same time, understanding the dynamic of city imaging requires examination at many different scales, ranging from the powerful catalyst of a single highly-imageable new building to attempts to reconceptualize the metropolitan region as a whole.

Before one can understand very much about the city imaging phenomenon, however, one must first explore the expanding range of methods and techniques that are available for visualizing and marketing places. Moreover, one must come to terms with the ways that the work of city designers and planners is embedded in a wider realm of urban policymaking and colored by the broader portrayal of cities, suburbs, and regions in the media.

The seminar is therefore structured into two major sections. The first part, entitled "The Mediated City," explores the burgeoning interconnections between urban development and new media, while the second part, entitled "Imaging Cities: Opportunities for Urban Designers," identifies arenas where urban designers can intervene to help re-image cities in positive ways, as well as methods by which such involvement can take place.

## **Endnotes**

[1] See also Lynch (1981).

[2] For a discussion of "the hyper-visual American city," see Boyer (1996, pp. 138-150).

[3] In an essay written near the end of his life that reflected on the strengths and weaknesses of *The Image of the City*, Lynch observed that "the original study set the meaning of places aside and dealt only with their identity and their structuring into larger wholes." Yet, as he candidly notes, "It did not succeed, of course. Meaning always crept in, in every sketch and comment. People could not help connecting their surroundings with the rest of their lives. But wherever possible, those meanings were brushed off the replies, because we thought that a study of meaning would be far more complicated than a study of mere identity" [Lynch (1985) in Banerjee and Southworth, 1990, p. 252].

[4] For a somewhat different account of this relationship, focusing on its implications for public housing redevelopment, see Vale (1995).

[5] The pseudo-event concept, coined by Daniel Boorstin (1961, pp. 11-12), refers to a happening that is 1) "not spontaneous, but comes about because someone has planned, planted, or incited it," 2) is "planted primarily (not always exclusively) for the immediate purpose of being reported or reproduced," 3) has an "ambiguous... relation to the underlying reality of the situation," and 4) is usually "intended to be a self-fulfilling prophecy."

[6] These public housing transformations are being carried out with support from HUD's HOPE VI program.

[7] At the same time, however, countervailing efforts seek to highlight the contributions of previously marginalized groups. See, for example, Hayden, 1995.

[8] See also Jackson (1995), and Paddison (1993). While the Anglo-European literature has taken a decidedly critical tone, the origins of the place promotion literature are largely American, dating back to a 1938 volume entitled *How to promote community and industrial development* (McDonald). Such work focuses on how to market successfully, rather than on the more complex cultural questions about what such place-marketing means.

## References

AlSayyad, N., ed. (1992). *Forms of dominance: On the architecture and urbanism of the colonial enterprise*. Aldershot, UK: Avebury.

Ashworth, G.J. and Voogd, H. (1990). *Selling the city: Marketing approaches in public sector urban planning*. London: Belhaven Press.

Boorstin, D. (1987, 1961 original). *The image: A guide to pseudo-events in America*. New York: Vintage.

Boyer, M.C. (1996). *CyberCities: Visual Perception in the Age of Electronic Communication*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.

Davis, M. (1992). *City of quartz: Excavating the future in Los Angeles*. New York: Vintage.

Gold, J.R. and Ward, S.V., eds. (1994). *Place promotion: The use of publicity and marketing to sell towns and regions*. Chichester, UK: John Wiley.

Grunwald, M. (1997). America's living rooms lose a laugh: Quirky TV show epitomized NYC, yadda, yadda, yadda. *Boston Globe*. December 27, p. 1.

Hayden, D. (1995). *The power of place: Urban landscapes as public history*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Jackson, E. (1995). *Marketing an image for main street: How to develop a compelling message and identity for downtown*. Washington, D.C.: National Main Street Center, National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Janowitz, M. (1952). *The Community press in an urban setting*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kearns, G. and Philo, C., eds. (1993). *Selling places: The city as cultural capital, past and present..* Oxford: Pergamon.

King, A.D., ed. (1996). *Re-presenting the city: ethnicity, capital, and culture in the 21st century metropolis*. New York: New York University Press.

Lynch, K. (1960). *The image of the city*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Lynch, K. (1972). *What time is this place?* Cambridge: MIT Press.

Lynch, K. (1976). *Managing the sense of a region*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Lynch, K. (1981). *Good city form..* Cambridge: MIT Press.

Lynch, K. (1990). Reconsidering *The image of the city*(1985). In Tridib Banerjee and Michael Southworth, eds., *City sense and city design: Writings and projects of Kevin Lynch*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

McDonald, F. H. (1938). *How to promote community and industrial development*. New York: Harper and Row.

Neill, W.J.V. and Fitzsimons, D. (1995). *Reimagining the pariah city: Urban development in Belfast and Detroit*. Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company.

Paddison, R. (1993). City marketing, image reconstruction, and urban regeneration. *Urban Studies* 30(2).

Smyth, H. (1994). *Marketing the city: The role of flagship developments in urban regeneration*. London: E & FN Spon.

Sorkin, M. ed. (1992). *Variations on a theme park: The new American city and the end of public space*. New York: Noonday.

Suttles, G.D. (1972). *The social construction of communities*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Vale, L.J. (1992). *Architecture, power, and national identity*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Vale, L.J. (1995). The imaging of the city: Public housing and Communication. *Communication Research*. 22 (6).

Weiss, M. A. (1987). *The rise of the community builders*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Wright, G. (1991). *The politics of design in French colonial urbanism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.