European urban image today. The lasting principles of Kevin Lynch

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Abstract Fifty years ago American urban planner Kevin Lynch published a book about the importance of Urban Image, which is a study of three major American Cities. His conclusions about the outlook of urban spaces, and the way in which people understand them are interesting. The psychological aspects of the study are modern even today. The idea of studying our settlements in detail, creating nice urban spaces, is in perfect harmony with the tendencies of European towns in the last two decades. Creating unity in our towns with the means of design, is another issue widely spread around the world. There is continuity between the thoughts presented in the above mentioned book and present day design.

Key words Urban Image, Landscape, design

American urban planner Kevin Andrew Lynch (1918-1984), published his best known book "The Image of the City" in the year 1960. Though it was written more than half a century ago, and it used as study cases three important American towns, Lynch's book is still full of novelty, and is in accordance with principles that we now try to apply in different corners of Europe. We try to save different urban spaces, or add value to others, if possible. The fight to safeguard more or less valuable pieces of ancient settlements, and the investments made in order to promote some places on our continent, makes today good use of the ideas written decades ago on the other side of the ocean. The idea itself to promote and study with such enthusiasm the theme of urban images was new and courageous in the past. Considering certain aspects of the problem, it is possible that we are able only nowadays to understand and use in a proper way the thoughts displayed in the above mentioned book. Ideas that seemed revolutionary half a century ago are considered today routine in Europe, where serious debates appear about the fate of certain urban spaces. Society is more and more conscious about the preservation of the values of the past, and perhaps even more about the importance of creating valuable urban space for local people and for tourists. A real contest can be observed today in Europe, where local communities compete in order to give meaning to their urban spaces. We should be able to give each place cultural value and uniqueness.

Lynch's method proposes the study of mental images that city dwellers have of the place they live in. The most important element is the visual quality of space, which should be easy to understand for everybody. The author considers that the mental image we have about a town is essential for orientation. The image we get is a result of former experiences, and of new sensations. These are very important elements of our connection with the surrounding world. He also considers that a proper urban image can be the ground for collective memories and symbols of society. A good urban image can help people establish a harmonious relationship with the exterior, and can prevent stress and bad feelings. Each town is in fact the symbol of a complex society, and can have an important cultural meaning. These ideas, used mostly as theory in the past, are essential today for landscape and garden designers, who have an important role in remodeling European urban spaces in the last twenty years. Concentrating on the issue of urban image, Lynch got very near to what we consider today to be the proper attitude of landscape designers towards built space. Though he knew that the same place can create in the minds of different people different attitudes and impressions, still he considered that a certain image should create a certain kind of effect on the onlookers. This depends of course on how homogenous the group of observers is. Age, origin, cultural level, are all important elements. The impressions of the population are very important for urban planners, considers the author. Today we observe that those planners who are really interested in this issue, would prefer to call themselves landscape designers. Cities are analysed today as urban landscape, in order to understand their visual expression. This is very much variable from one place to another. There are places which are special, have a great capacity to impress, and are very different from any other part of the world. Lynch understood that different American cities have a very different influence on people, and he considered that the essential elements in this process are: open space, vegetation, the movement in different directions, and
visual contrasts. He observes that central Boston, which resembles a European town, has a rather positive impact on people. This comparison tells a lot about the qualities of our traditional European urban spaces. One of the conclusions of the analyses is that people adapt to the place they live in, and that they create their identity and mental structure with the elements given by environment. Though these mechanisms always resemble, the levels of satisfaction and orientation capacity of the individuals are different in each situation. In American towns people associate certain urban spaces with different social classes, who are supposed to be more present in those areas. The functional hierarchy of more and less important streets should appear also in the image of these places. The importance of a street should be obvious through its aspect. In Los Angeles people seem to be disturbed by the fact that their city doesn't have a historic centre, and are interested in the past of the place. It seems that for each town a certain number of citizens have in common a certain image of the public spaces. So there is not only one, but more collective mental images for the same place. In the meantime, each place is defined rather by a set of collective images, and only rarely by a single strong main mental picture.

Lynch considered that certain elements of the urban structure could define its characteristics. Today, when landscape designers analyse towns for their values, the fifty years old principles can still be applied. The mentioned elements were: paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks. When the main paths of the city resemble, the whole urban image might suffer. The author observed that certain characteristic rows of trees and facades created the specificity of some urban spaces. We know today that diversity of streets and squares is one the main elements that landscape designers should look for. The study showed that paths with clear origins and destinations had stronger identity, contributed more to the character of the settlement, and helped people more in orientation. Natural elements like mountains or the sea constitute generally strong limits of the built spaces. On the contrary, districts are defined in many cases by elements of cultural origin like characteristic ornaments on the facades. The differences between neighbouring districts helps each of them to express their character more clearly by contrast. Contemporary landscape designers use these ideas, and apply them in different situations, in order to make towns more attractive, diverse, and easier to understand.

Urban elements become more easily landmarks if they are helped by their special location in town, but it depends mainly on the cultural and symbolic value of the object. It is obvious that half a century ago some urban planners had a very clear view about the way in which built space can influence the life and the attitude of the inhabitants. In fact a strong and harmonious urban image was a rarity in all times. In all the smaller towns of Europe landmarks are created, which add to the value of the urban space, and become local centres of interest.

Many architect and urban planners consider today that natural and built landscape should be judged in a similar way, using the same methods. Some consider that urban landscape should be analysed in the way we do with places created by nature. What is nice in nature could be a good plastic solution for urban shapes also. The evolution of the last decades in landscape and garden design is a very important step forward, and it helped many settlements evolve visually. The effect would be even more spectacular if designers would succeed to have a global view of the town, expressed by details.

Important urban elements should appear in contrast with their background. In many cases people associate certain places with names. Object can become landmarks because of different reasons, and can be of different types. They can be grouped in certain areas, or dispersed in the town. These ideas are used today by landscape designers also, who are conscious that they must use different landmarks in order to give meaning to their work. Present day urban conditions make this compulsory.

Nodes are important objects of the towns, though rarely are positioned in the right place. They can have great effect only if they are sustained by proper surroundings. Different elements like pavements or trees can be used to lead towards important urban places.

A district is a homogenous part of a settlement, with elements that can generally be found in a certain region, but don't exist in other parts of the town. Homogeneity can be achieved using buildings, decorations, certain types of streets. Three or four such elements are considered enough to define a strong identity of a place. In ideal situations the function, role and outlook of an urban space are all in harmony.

The qualities of urban spaces can be influenced by certain aspects such as: the difference between an object and its background, the clarity of shapes, the continuity of certain elements, dominance of certain objects, the clarity of the link between two objects, variation, visual horizon. Continuity is important for urban images of a town. It can be achieved with different methods. Details are important because they give value to the streets and squares. The elements of the city should communicate something to people and should attract their attention. The more we succeed to create a diverse and meaningful image of the town, the more people will be able to understand the urban space and feel well while using it. Lynch writes also about the metropolitan areas of the great cities, with their specific structures and special possibilities.

It is difficult to find the valuable parts in an existing context, and to underline them with the means of design. Creating new urban images in new quarters is totally different problem. A global visual plan would be important, for the use of designers who create urban
images in new and old parts of cities. This could influence the global planning process, and in the end the outlook of the settlement. The ultimate objective: a different mental image of the town. We should be able to understand urban ambient at a greater scale. The ambient should be not only well organized, but also symbolic and poetic. A nice urban image can influence all human activities. It is not enough to create nice places in towns. People must be educated, in order to see the urban space in a proper way.

Urban design and landscape design succeed today to change essentially the look of certain spaces. People consider that the streets in their towns represent them and their cultural heritage. Design is becoming more and more a social, political and cultural issue, debated on a large scale. The results achieved decades ago by specialists of the field are helpful, because they gives a strong background to present day efforts. Considering their own work an important cultural action, and using the means of modern technique, designers succeed today to surpass the theories of the past decades, but consider them a basis of their actions.

Results and Discussions

It is obvious that the work of Kevin Lynch concluded half a century ago, is in accordance with the tendencies of modern design in Europe and in the world. European Landscape Design developed in the last decades in accordance with the economic growth and the cultural demands of European societies. There is an influence of theoretical books of the last century over present day design, though it cannot be measured exactly. Nevertheless, we must accept that Lynch had modern and courageous ideas that were hard to accept in the past, but are very much present in design studios today.

Conclusions

1. The theoretical work of urban planner Kevin Lynch contains valuable ideas even for our century that can influence the thinking of architects, designers and landscape planners.

2. European towns developed in the last two decades a brand new way of dealing with the problems of towns, and the outlook of settlements. In this process there were applied ideas which were present in some theoretical works written decades ago.

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