Kevin Lynch, Walter Benjamin and Interstitial Space in San Francisco

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Abstract

This paper compares two theories related to the image and identity of cities set in relation to empirical studies they have directly informed and inspired. The first is exemplified by Kevin Lynch’s theory of the clarity of visual urban form, articulated in his book The Image of the City. This work had a significant influence on the 1971 Urban Design Plan of San Francisco, which shaped the city’s future image on the legibility of its exterior form in relation to the city’s unique natural setting. In contrast is Walter Benjamin’s implicit theory of urban form based on an excavation of overlooked, marginal urban spaces, which relates to recent research I have conducted on interstitial spaces—or “slots”—located between Victorian-era buildings in the central part of San Francisco. By contrasting what Lynch calls a “legible image” of urban form with what Benjamin describes as a “dialectical image” of the city, demonstrated by a detailed analysis and interpretation of interstitial space, this paper points to the possibility of an open-ended and “operable model” of design as opposed to a fixed, “imagistic model.”

Introduction

In the iconic, mid-century American novel, On the Road, Jack Kerouac describes San Francisco as a “…fabulous white city [set amidst] her eleven mystic hills with the blue of the Pacific and its advancing wall of potato-patch fog beyond and smoke and goldenness in the late
afternoon of time (Kerouac, 1955).” Such a phenomenological “image” of the city not only gripped Kerouac, but also captured the imagination of the planners and urban designers that came to work in San Francisco in the 1960’s, and who went on to crystallize this image in a key moment of the city’s urban historiography, namely the 1971 Urban Design Plan (the 1971 Plan). One of them was Allan Jacobs, director of the San Francisco Planning Department and spearheading the influential Plan, who said, “San Francisco is generally accepted as one of the more handsome American cities (Jacobs, 1978).” In the 1960’s an indiscriminate approach to new development was marring the physical image of the city, and according to Jacobs, San Francisco needed a strong statement in support of its aesthetic aspiration to reverse this trend. The inspiration for shaping this statement, as articulated in the 1971 Plan, came from the urban theorist Kevin Lynch’s seminal work on the visual quality of cities. According to Lynch’s work, aspects of legibility and clarity of the city’s constituent elements—its physical form—were vital to it being perceived as a coherent entity from within and without. Indeed, San Francisco desperately needed a road-map for future development and the 1971 Plan served as an important guide. Yet, it also put in place an image of the city that was focused on its visual form, influenced in large part by Lynch’s work.

In contrast (but not necessarily in opposition) to viewing the city as an extrinsic construct, or what Lynch calls its “environmental image,” Walter Benjamin provides us with a contemplation on urban life and form that is based on an intrinsic reading of the city, or an “archeological excavation (Gilloch, 1996).” Like the Parisian documentary photographer Eugene Atget, Benjamin was interested in the minutia and marginalia of cities, consciously resisting an overarching and coherent view, and instead, mining the marginal forms and experiences of the city to offer a perspective that was a dialectical counterpoint to the phantasmagoric forms of modernity. Benjamin proposes a “physiognomic” reflection of the city that can be achieved through an archeological approach, in which one digs beneath the surface, into its unknown, hidden places, in order to construct a narrative of social life. For Benjamin, the key to understanding this social life is located in the physical structure of the city itself, and to unlock this, he ostensibly provides us with a (set of tools with which to craft a) narrative of the form of the city as well (Gilloch, 1996).
But why look at Benjamin? Precisely because Benjamin’s critique of modernity’s dreamlike forms inspires a present-day circumspection of neo-modernism’s claims to political-economic and architectural hegemony of the city. Benjamin’s writing on cities, his implicit “theory” of urbanism, reverberates through the work of a long line of urban theorists and practitioners for whom the liminal and marginal conditions of the city have served as a significant counterpoint to its more celebrated forms of institutional and corporate architecture. Building on the work of Eugene Atget, Guy Debord, Gordon Matta-Clark and Rachel Whiteread, I will examine specific, overlooked and unrepresented spatial entities called “slots,” or interstitial spaces, located between Victorian-era residential buildings in the central part of San Francisco, in order to demonstrate how Benjamin’s reading of cityscapes can be extended to urban and architectural observation, documentation, analysis and interpretation. I will compare two theories related to the image and identity of cities, in relation to two specific case studies: the first, Lynch’s theory for the analysis and design of cities based on the legibility of visual form that inspired the 1971 Urban Design Plan of San Francisco; and, the second, Benjamin’s reading of the city based on its overlooked, marginal spaces that can be associated with the observation and interpretation of interstitial spaces in San Francisco.

This paper attempts to contrast what Lynch calls a “legible image” of urban form, with what Benjamin describes as a “dialectical image” of the city, where past and present, the obscure and the apparent coalesce in a single instance. Not only do these differing approaches of examining cities provide us with contrasting urban narratives—one based on macro-formal features, and the on micro-spatial characteristics—but they also imply two distinct models of design for the metropolis. The first, an “imagistic” model of the city, where design is informed by a well-defined, prescribed definition of place; and the second, an “operable” model (Hale, 2002, pp.31-42) where design takes an exploratory approach of excavating and interpreting the structure of the city and reconstituting its integral parts for the future.
Lynch’s City

In his book entitled *The Image of the City*, Kevin Lynch (1960) proposes a theory for understanding the visual quality of cities. Lynch was particularly focused on the legibility, image, structure and identity of the urban environment where the city’s constituent parts and patterns could be easily grasped and organized into a coherent, unified whole, namely the “image.” This image, Lynch proposed, could be represented as a cognitive map, and in order to realize and sustain such a map, Lynch put forward a set of urban elements into which the city could be neatly compartmentalized. These were: Paths, Edges, Nodes, Districts and Landmarks. By studying three American cities, Boston, Jersey City and Los Angeles, and interviewing its residents, Lynch demonstrated that when these elements were clearly defined and legible to the inhabitants of a city, they produced a mental picture or cognitive map, which then provided the residents (or us) with an enhanced experience of the city.

More than merely providing a theory of the visual quality of cities, Lynch was focused on postulating a method and model for the design of cities; of how a city could be organized, structured and laid out in the landscape, and how its constituent parts or elements could be designed to achieve a clear and coherent urban image. In constructing his design thesis, Lynch provides the example of preindustrial Florence as a city one can emulate, describing its form in terms of its geomorphic setting, the clear visibility of the central core from “overhead,” and the ability to recognize its unmistakable principal landmark – the Duomo (Lynch, 1960, p. 92). Lynch then elaborates on his five key elements, presenting several prescriptive directives to designers regarding how the principal paths of a city can be designed, and also how other complimentary urban elements such as the edges, landmarks, nodes and districts can be shaped in unison to create a cohesive city image (Lynch, 1960, pp.105-108).

In the late 1960’s, Lynch’s theories and design methods turned out to be an important source of inspiration and guidance for the planners and designers who began working on the 1971 Urban Design Plan for San Francisco. At the outset, the Plan begins to formulate a “genius loci,” or a spirit of place, echoing Lynch’s call for “imageable form.” The city is described as a great urban place of beauty and charm, unsurpassed in its setting of sea, bay, hills and distant
mountains; a site with “benign” built form where the man-made and the natural intersect in perfect harmony to create a “city [that] can be seen, felt and experienced as few others can (SF Planning Department, 1971).” Each section of the Plan, namely: City Pattern, Conservation, Major New Development and Neighborhood Environment, was accompanied by a set of “principles and policies” for design, many of which assisted in reinforcing the “image” of the city as it was set forth at the outset. In the two years preceding the publication of the final document, the planning department produced eight preliminary reports and three special studies that dealt with different aspects of city planning and urban design. Preliminary Reports Four and Five that dealt with “Internal Pattern and Image” and “Urban Design Principles” respectively, were heavily influenced by Lynch’s work, and their emphasis on the legibility of the city’s formal elements formed the major thrust of the ultimate Urban Design Plan.

The final version of the Plan was richly illustrated with several photographs and sketches that depicted distant views of the city seen from neighborhoods, from the surrounding bay, or as Jack Kerouac might have done, through the windshield of an automobile. The city was thus modeled as an object of the gaze, or as Lynch put it, a “construction in space,” meant to be viewed and read from afar (Lynch, 1960, p.1). What emerged in the Plan is a distinct image of what the city was; and a prescriptive model of what the city should continue to look like. Indeed, the Plan for San Francisco provided a workable document for long-range planning and design that could be effectively used as a guide for future development. It broke new ground as the first such plan for a major American city, including a section on “conservation,” entirely antithetical to its time when bold new forms and a tabula rasa approach to design had characterized much of the 1960’s. Yet the intense focus on the image of the city saw the solidification of a distinct narrative of place based on an exteriorization of form, and a creation of a model of place that all planning and design would then onwards work towards.

Benjamin’s City

In the late 1960’s Lynch’s ideas and methods developed a decade earlier were also profoundly inspiring to young planners and urban designers who were keen on providing an
overarching image and workable blueprint for design action in the city. Their mission, like many before and after them was to create cities that are livable; that, in general, provide a better quality of life for its residents. Central to this mission was to realize a successful organization of the social life of the city and ensure that political and economic processes worked smoothly, and cultural forms of expression were made possible. As a critical theorist, and socio-political commentator, Benjamin had been engaged in uncovering and understanding these aspects of a city, which he believed were located in its very physical structure. In his book entitled *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City*, Graeme Gilloch (1996) provides a set of motifs or themes, which when read together, provide a road-map for understanding Benjamin’s numerous writings on cities. Gilloch charts the territories of physiognomy, phenomenology, history, mythology, politics and text, to produce a road-map, which offers us the possibility of framing relevant questions related to the analysis and design of cities. For example: Through what lens or with which bias does Benjamin approach or look at the city? What does he specifically focus on? Is there a process of documentation and analysis that emerges from his approach? And, finally, what possibilities, specifically for urban design, do Benjamin’s cityscapes initiate?

Let me try and respond to some of these questions. Benjamin’s primary approach or lens of looking at the city is analogous to an “urban physiognomist who is part archeologist, part collector and part detective (Gilloch, 1996, p.6).” Physiognomic reading for Benjamin is a critical enterprise that penetrates beneath the façades of things to reveal their true character. For Benjamin “the metropolis is a multi-faceted entity,” an intricate “picture puzzle” that cannot be reduced or depicted in a singular mode (Gilloch, 1996, pp.169-170). Instead, Benjamin seeks provisional, often incomplete, readings of the city gleaned from the various fragments of physical character and social life that he stumbles upon, consciously eschewing an overarching perspective. In his numerous encounters with cities, an example of which is encapsulated in the article he wrote on Naples after a trip in 1924, Benjamin was not intent on depicting Naples as the “cradle of Western civilization, but was interested in particular forms of mundane life found within the urban environment (Gilloch 1996, p.24).” Benjamin was focused on peripheral aspects of urbanity not only as a critique of the overarching forms of modernity, but also to provide a set of
emblematic motifs that could form the basis of redemptive social models and practices. Benjamin, Gilloch says, "gives voice to the periphera, the experiences of those that modern forms of order strive to render silent and invisible (Gilloch, 1996, p.9)."

In Benjamin's essay on Naples, one of the major visual tools that he uses to illustrate his observations of the city is the concept of porosity. In using such a perspective Benjamin negates spatial and elemental clarity in the city, blurring distinctions between the public and private, and inside and outside; and, as it can be inferred, between solid and void, and figure and ground. Porosity enables us to look for what is concealed and hidden in the fabric of city, "a key to the interpretation of the urban setting (Gilloch, 1996, p.25)." Benjamin is intent on "finding" the overlooked parts (places, spaces, things, experiences) of the city, which is mostly possible when boundaries are blurred, and less so when the city is neatly packaged into legible and clear spatial compartments. Benjamin’s writings are not merely vignettes or sketches of a city frozen in time, but are an incisive critique of modernity, and as I shall further explore, imbued with implicit actions or future possibilities. For example, in the essay on Naples, Benjamin writes, “Building and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades and stairways. In everything they [buildings] preserve the scope to become a theater of new, unforeseen constellations (Benjamin, 1986, pp.165-166).” This statement potently suggests ideas of reuse, renewal and redeployment. Gilloch says that Benjamin’s later writings on cities strengthened ephemeral observation with rigorous historic critique, inaugurating the idea of the "monad" in which the "universal is discernible within the particular. Each element recovered is monadological, containing within it the totality whence it came, and is also illuminating as parts of the new montage in which it is assembled (Gilloch, 1996, p.35).” With the idea of the monad, Benjamin suggests that we look at systems and structures within the city as opposed to overarching themes and images. His critical theory of cityscape provides an open-ended, blurred, interpretative approach to reading urban form with a focus on the marginal as a means of eliciting identity, character and meaning. As Benjamin says in his analysis of Naples, “The stamp of the definitive is avoided. No situation appears intended forever, no figure asserts its thus and not otherwise (Benjamin, 1986, p.166)."
Finding, Documenting and Interpreting Interstitial Space

“Lost times are like overlooked places,” says Gilloch (1996, p.67), in reference to Benjamin’s writings on Berlin and the sense of historic memory that cities contain. But if one were to reverse that statement, that is, overlooked places are like lost time, it suggests an erasure of the memory of a city. Benjamin’s writings aid in regaining a sense of historic time, not a nostalgic past, but a critical engagement with history. They possibly provide architects and urbanists with a critical approach, distinct focus, methods for analysis and representation, and finally, potentialities where various representations of the urban setting can be renewed and rearranged as new forms in the city. In this section, I will attempt to demonstrate how such a critical theory of urban engagement—inspired by Benjamin—can be extended or applied to the nineteenth century urban fabric of San Francisco.

Inasmuch as the urban form of San Francisco was shaped by macro concerns of formal legibility, the architectural character of the city was pegged to its historic residential districts where the continuity of the street wall and the stylistic richness of its Victorian (among other) architecture were identified as distinctive and remarkable characteristics (Baird, 1962; Aidala, 1974). The gaze of planners and preservationists was so fixed on the façades of the Victorians that the space by their sides went largely unnoticed. Yet, in applying Benjamin’s archeological approach of excavating the city, one can find buried between the Victorians, narrow slivers of interstitial space that reveal the porosity of the urban block, drawing one’s eye into interior spaces, blurring distinctions between the public realm and private space, creating a percussive rhythm of alternative positive and negative space, and producing a narrative of place—of its identity and character—based on its marginal entities [Fig 1].

The emergence of interstitial spaces—slots—can be traced to the period between 1850 and 1900 during which the “all-American” grid was used, in conjunction with the Spanish vara (approximately a yard) system of measurement, to lay out the central part of San Francisco. What emerged were blocks that were generally 400 feet by 275 feet, further subdivided into building lots that were typically 25 feet wide and 100-137.5 feet deep. With several such narrow and long
lots facing the street, row-house developers responded by providing deep incisions in the street wall that would bring much-needed sunlight and fresh air into the interior of buildings. Slots are unique to row-house typologies in San Francisco, where unlike their counterparts on the East Coast or Europe, the houses are joined at the hip (back) but open at the face (front). Most slots have a distinct form and geometry: narrow spaces of varying width, depth and height that range between four to eleven feet wide, ten to fifty feet deep and three to four stories high [Fig 2]. Their surfaces are punctuated by doors and windows, animated by faceted or semi-circular bay windows, and embellished with roof overhangs, service features and ornamentation [Fig 3]. Although initially planned almost exclusively to serve as light-wells and access to rear yards, slots have accommodated new functions and transformed into service yards, garages, gardens and entrances creating new layers of use and meaning in the pragmatic consideration of Victorian architecture.

Benjamin’s archeological approach brings slots into the realm of our urban experience and paves the way to detailed documentation and analysis. The network and function of slots can be examined at varying scales ranging from the city, neighborhood, block, and to the space itself [Fig 4]. At the city scale, slots can be found across eleven neighborhoods in the central part of the city; at the neighborhood scale, one sees a distinct pattern of slots that permeates the architecture of the block; and at the block scale, we see an interconnected pattern between street, slot and rear-yard. Focusing on the slot itself captures aspects of scale and volume and its various spatial intricacies [Fig 5]. What emerges from this investigation is an elaboration of Benjamin’s idea of the “monad,” where the slot can be seen as a cell or organism of the city, or where the “universal is discernible in the specific (Gilloch, 1996, p.35).” Such an idea was also considered in great depth by the Italian Morphologists who dissected the city for its basic morphological elements and proposed that the form of the city was based on the composition of these very elements, or what they called its “morphogenetic” units (Vernez-Moudon, 2007). For Aldo Rossi, the historic spaces of the city constituted what he called “urban artifacts,” which he saw as a critical part in the evolution of the form of the city, again echoing the idea of a basic organism—the slot (Rossi, 1982).
This analysis also opens the possibility of seeing the space of the slot as positive form and interpreting these forms as elements that can be reconstituted in the urban and architectural design of the city [Fig 6]. The work of conceptual artists Bruce Nauman, Gordon Matta-Clark and Rachel Whiteread provides valuable analogous methods for interpreting and representing unseen space. For instance, in the late 1960’s, the American artist Bruce Nauman made a cast of the space under a chair, which shifted the focus from the normative object to the otherwise neglected void space, and simultaneously gave form to that which was seemingly invisible or absent. Nauman's sculptural anagram sets up an intriguing premise when extended to urban observation; it proposes a conceptual shift by emphasizing negative space over positive form. In the late 1970’s, in a quest to reexamine the traditional art object and architecture, New York-based artist Gordon Matta-Clark and the group Anarchitecture rejected (and sometimes even destroyed) obvious architectural objects in favor of the voids, gaps and leftover spaces of the city. Quite clearly echoing Benjamin, Matta-Clark stated that their objective was not “to demonstrate an alternative attitude to buildings,” but to bring to attention spaces that were “perceptually significant” in the experience of the city (Matta-Clark, 1978, cited in Lee, 2000). The British artist Rachel Whiteread’s work continues to grapple with aspects of unseen space in the city, but she does it by expanding on Nauman’s method of minimalist sculpture. Her concrete and resin sculptures of lost houses, the spaces behind books on a shelf or the insides of a bottle, make tangible the liminal spaces of everyday life. Whiteread can be seen as an archaeologist of space, overturning objects to look underneath them, sifting through structures in a city to find cracks or hidden voids between them, and uncovering spatial conditions that exist in what Benjamin would have called our collective “optical unconscious” – spaces that we see but never register or represent (Benjamin, 1972, pp. 5-26). Whiteread’s work is not focused merely on aesthetic exploration, but instead, like Benjamin, it is based on her acute perception of urban life: the desire to construct a social narrative of the city and provide through her sculptural forms what Benjamin has called a “dialectical image,” where the past and present, the mundane and phantasmagoric intersect in a single instance (Townsend, 2006, p.7; Gilloch, 1996, p.35).
It is this “dialectical image” that we see through the modeling and casting of slots in San Francisco [Fig 7]. The forms obtained through a process of casting, for instance, retain the impression and traces of a past architecture and urban form, yet exist as a new object in the present. The casts of slots, like those of Nauman and Whiteread, propose a dialectical image, where the unseen and the seen, the tangible and the amorphous collide in a single instance of tactile form. But what is even more significant is that they serve as a starting point for design engagement in the future. The forms derived from the casting of slots provide spatial clues—architectonic forms that can be recomposed and redeployed in the city.

But how can the concepts of the monad and the dialectical image inform an operable model for design in the city? Or, how does the investigation of slots provide an indication of an operable model for design in the city? Precisely because, first, the analysis of slots presents an operational understanding of the structure of the city, it uncovers a spatial rule of the urban fabric in contrast to an “all-encompassing image” (Hale, 2002, p.41). Second, the forms derived from casting slots, can be operated upon, architecturally transformed and redeployed in the city as new formal configurations. What this investigation of slots demonstrates, by linking to Benjamin’s concepts, is a distinct urban and architectural method of operating in the city—of finding, interpreting, reconstituting and redeploying—an operable model for design.

Conclusions

The monad and the dialectical image pose an interesting notion for a narrative of the city based on the image of the slot, its spatial characteristics and its network cast across a significant portion of the city, as opposed to a narrative drawn from a legible image of the macro urban landscape as seen in the Urban Design Plan of San Francisco and its Lynchian inspiration. Benjamin’s concepts of the monad and dialectical image are not limited to the construction of a narrative of place; however, as I have tried to demonstrate in the discussion above, they provide for an understanding of the structure of the city and its constituent parts, and for an exploratory and investigative process by which these parts can be interpreted and reconstituted in the city as new forms. Such a structural and operational understanding of the city, thus, yields the possibility
of an open-ended operational model of design in the city, as opposed to a fixed, imagistic model. What I have also tried to demonstrate in the above discussion is how Benjamin’s critical theory of urban engagement can be applied to an urban and architectural analysis of the city; that is, what Benjamin might excavate and what “new constellations” he might propose.

**Literature Cited/References**


San Francisco Planning Department, 1971, *Urban Design Plan*, San Francisco

Illustrations

Fig 1 Finding and revealing interstitial space (photo by author)

Fig 2 Focusing on slots – elements, volume, and scale (drawing by Paul Madonna)
Fig 3 The slot and its details (photo by Moshe Quinn)
Fig 4 An investigation of interstitial space at varying scales – city, neighborhood, block and city
(diagram by author and Catherine Chang)
Fig 5 Analyzing slots – detailed plan and section (drawings by Catherine Chang)
Fig 6 Interpreting the space of the slot – deriving positive form from negative space (drawing by Catherine Chang)

Fig 7 Casting the space of the slot – creating new forms that can be redeployed in the city (model by Samuel North)