

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY  
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

PSYCHOLOGY SECTION

CAMBRIDGE 39, MASSACHUSETTS

13 September 1954

Professor Kevin Lynch  
Department of City and  
Regional Planning  
Room 7-346, M. I. T.

Dear Professor Lynch:

Thank you for your letter of September 2 and for the discussion of the proposed study, *The Perceptual Form of the City*.

Your plans are certainly most interesting. From a psychological point of view, they appear to take you into areas in which psychological techniques are by no means well worked out. This suggests that the existing methodology of psychology may not be of as much help to you as I wish it could be, but, on the other hand, it indicates that what you do will be of considerable psychological interest.

In your discussion of the analysis of the existing visual environment in the city, you consider "vocabulary" and "grammar," but, I note, you do not consider "meaning" as a coordinate problem area. I am wondering, therefore, whether you are intentionally deferring for later examinations some of the problems we talked about last spring --- problems having to do with the relation between the perceptual form of the city and the reactions of the city dwellers. One reason for raising this question is that it may be questionable whether one can work out an appropriate vocabulary and an appropriate grammar without reference to the basic problems in the solution of which they (the vocabulary and the grammar) will be used. This is only a question; I do not mean to say I know the answer.

As I read the description of the proposed study, there ran through my mind some of the thoughts we discussed, I believe, last spring. These had to do with the possibility that some of the function-transformation techniques used by the communication engineers might be useful in analyzing the physical form, or the stimulus

form of the city. To state perhaps the simplest case: consider the silhouette of a sky line. Except for openwork in electric signs, etc., this is a single function of a single variable. A possibly interesting hypothesis is that the Fourier transform of the sky line silhouette, which one might call the spectrum of the sky line, is relatable to the artistic acceptability, or perhaps to the average city dweller's reaction, to the sky line. My conjecture is that a reasonably flat spectrum is to be preferred. The trouble with "bleak" sky lines is that they lack high-frequency components. The trouble with "gingerbready" sky lines is that they have too-strong high-frequency components.

The foregoing may serve to stoke up your traces on our earlier discussion. I shall be interested in hearing how your work progresses.

Yours sincerely,

[signed]

J. C. R. Leiklider

JCRL: jm

October 12, 1954

Professor J. C. R. Licklider  
Psychology Section  
Department of Economics and  
Social Science  
Room 53-254B, M.I.T.

Dear Professor Licklider:

Please excuse my long delay in answering your good letter on our city form study. The opening of school drove research into a dark corner.

Your criticism on the introduction of "meaning" into the study is well-taken and basic. The principal question is what will be the best time to bring in this issue, and very likely the relative emphasis we put on meaning vs. form quality will always be a difficult one for us. We have no intention of leaving out meaning, but perhaps for putting it aside only in the very first stages. Perhaps this is wrong, but we thought to try it that way, and then to correct ourselves in a few months.

Incidentally, the proposal is somewhat modified from our first ideas because the foundation frowned on our doing any extensive psychology studies. They pointed to our own lack of ability in this field, and we couldn't argue back very hard.

But we are still convinced of the psychological base to our studies, and mean to learn all we can about it, and perhaps to try some pilot studies without going in very deeply. We plan to organize some miniature seminars on the subject for our benefit in the future, and would like to ask you to participate in one. Might this be possible?

In any case, Gyorgy or I will call you about it shortly.

Sincerely yours,

Kevin Lynch

KL: deo  
cc. Gyorgy Kepes

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PSYCHOLOGY SECTION

CAMBRIDGE 39, MASSACHUSETTS

3 March 1955

Drs. Kevin Lynch and Gyorgy Kepes  
Department of City and Regional Planning  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
7-333

Dear Drs. Lynch and Kepes:

Thank you for sending the copy of "A Framework for the Form of City Study and Some Topics for Study." I have just read it with interest.

The principal comment I want to make is difficult to formulate. It is that, although I get a feeling for several of the problems you mention in connection with the organization you have selected---the one based on normative criteria---I am rather at a loss for operational interpretation. That is, I am not lead directly to specific operations of observation or data collection and analysis---I do not have a good grip on the connections between the basic concepts of the organization and the specific steps of the actual investigation.

I say this not by way of criticism, because I know that you have more definite ideas about the operational interpretation than I have or, for that matter, could be expected to have at my distance from the problem. The reason for making the comment is that there may be others roughly in my position, and it may be of interest to you to have my principal reaction. I only wish that I could state it more accurately.

My second reaction is nothing more or less than an expression of a psychologist's bias for the descriptive and against the normative. I wish it were possible to approach the problem of the form of the city in a way that did not require a priori assumptions about what is good for, or what is bad for, the people who live in the city. In psychology, I think it is true, progress has been made almost in direct proportion to the degree to

which the normative has been set aside in favor of the descriptive approach. But, again, I realize that what looks desirable to me in principle start to look confusing as soon as you start to ask specific questions about how to proceed. I think, therefore, that I rather agree with your choice of approach. The agreement is genuine, though I give up the favoring of a descriptive approach most reluctantly.

A third comment may seem a little paradoxical: It seems to me that your “certain more general investigations” are more specific, or at least I see specific operations flowing from them more readily, than your topics for normative study.

Thank you, again, for letting me have a look at the framework. Certainly, you are doing an interesting job, and equally certainly, it is a big one.

Yours sincerely,

{signed}

J. C. R. Licklider

JCRL: jg

April 8, 1955

Dr. J. C. R. Licklider  
Psychology Section  
Department of Economics and Social Science  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
52-254B

Dear Dr. Licklider:

Many thanks for your thoughtful comments of March 3 on our outline for the form of cities study. I have no excuse for the delay in answering it, other than too many papers on my desk.

Your puzzlement in connecting our general criteria statements to the actual studies to be made was not unique, and the way you put it helped us to understand the confusion of others. I think the truth is that there is no immediate connection from general statement to detailed study, but only a directing of our attention or interest to a certain area.

In other words, instead of saying that "cats are black" and being led to a direct test of whether they are indeed black, we are saying "it would be best for all of us if cats were black." Since we are not prepared to prove this vague statement, we are really saying "since we assume that we would all be healthier and happier in a black-cat world, then one of the most important things we could learn about cats is how to make them black." It gives us a set of values as guide-posts in a complicated beginning, and the studies which are stimulated by them might, at the end, tell us something about the relative importance of those values, as well as speaking to the question of how to serve them.

I am afraid that our attachment to the normative is a rather deep-seated prejudice, unscientific as we are. I think that we are likely to compromise, however, when we come to make our definite

choices, by carrying forward both a set of studies clustered around one of the normative criteria, and another set which asks more open-minded descriptive questions on the reaction of people to their cities.

Since the outline came out we have been testing out a series of study methods to help us pick and choose. In another month or two we hope to have some conclusions as to these methods. At that time we will be knocking at your door for guidance again.

Sincerely yours,

Kevin Lynch

KL/deo