

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

DEFINING AN URBAN IMAGE

A city is like a living thing . . . a united
and continuous whole.
Plutarch, *Moralia* 559

Visitors to a city form an impression of what they have experienced. This mental construct is based upon two reactions. The first and most immediate as observers move through the urban environment is the external physical response registered by the senses – hearing, smell, touch, and above all sight. Second is the internal conceptual reaction determined by culturally conditioned notions of what a city is, does, and means. Together these reactions forge a memorable urban image. According to this definition, an urban image is not a pictorial representation, but the idea of the city produced in the minds of contemporary visitors. Each individual who passes through an urban environment devises a slightly different mental image, yet all visitors in any given period navigate the same physical and cultural environment. As a result, they together formulate a collective urban image sharing the same basic characteristics. Responsive to the physical environment, it is highly visual in nature, yet is also forcefully shaped by such intangibles as urban mood and character. A strong urban image is not reliant solely upon grand individual urban monuments or a comprehensive urban design, but also upon the molding of enriched and interrelated experiences.

Kevin Lynch brought the concept of an urban image to a broad audience with his influential book, *The Image of the City*, of 1960. Studying how city residents conceptualized their urban environments, he discovered that individual, personal ideas and experiences melded to form a common urban image.¹ For study purposes, Lynch defined three components of an environmental image: identity, structure, and meaning. Though he reminded his readers always to consider the three together, his own work focused on the identity and structure of the physical form rather than on

conceptual issues. As a result, his presentation was more prescriptive than expository. Such an emphasis is understandable for an investigator operating in the same time period as his subject. The tangible is more immediate and well-defined, and thus demands more attention.² In contrast, examinations of past urban environments allow modern researchers sufficient distance for tempered analysis.

In the majority of cities throughout history, urban experiences evolved in an ad hoc manner, with limited purposeful manipulation. The lack of concern with the choreography of experiences and urban meaning resulted in unclear or unmemorable urban ideas. In select instances, however, strong forces attempted to shape a focused, purposeful image. The choreographed experiences, imprinted signs and symbols, and unifying narratives of a few cities from different periods and cultures still have the power to affix in the memory. The attraction of strong historical urban images is heightened in late twentieth-century America, when a lack of positive sensorial stimuli and diffused overall identities have made our cities less than appealing or memorable. Today, we treat our urban environments as disposable because they offer impoverished experiences and devalued content. As a result, tourists flock to urban environments with clear meanings and rich sensorial experiences such as the historic cores of Florence and old Cairo, or such faux historical examples such as Main Street at Disneyland. In a few notable instances, modern cities have consciously labored to recapture the potency of a favored urban image from their past long after the historic physical environment has been lost. For example, the California city of Santa Barbara obsessively and profitably promotes the positively perceived urban image associated with its early days as a Spanish settlement.³

Study of the more notable urban images from the past can advance the understanding of how cities become memorable. Historic cities are urban laboratories frozen in time. Isolated from the particular concerns that shaped a historical urban form, modern researchers can bring an objectivity impossible for the study of the environments in which we live. In contrast to open-ended contemporary images, those of the past can be concisely isolated temporally and topically. With hindsight, we can identify succinct periods when an image was formed, and trace the complex factors affecting its evolution. Through the examination of past urban environments, we are reacquainted with the conceptual and experiential aspects that have been lost or minimized over the centuries. For example, the urban images of preindustrial cities are based upon pedestrian experience, allowing researchers to evaluate concerns and responses foreign to generations weaned on vehicular movement. Similarly, the framework for urban patronage has changed radically over the years. The experience of modern cities

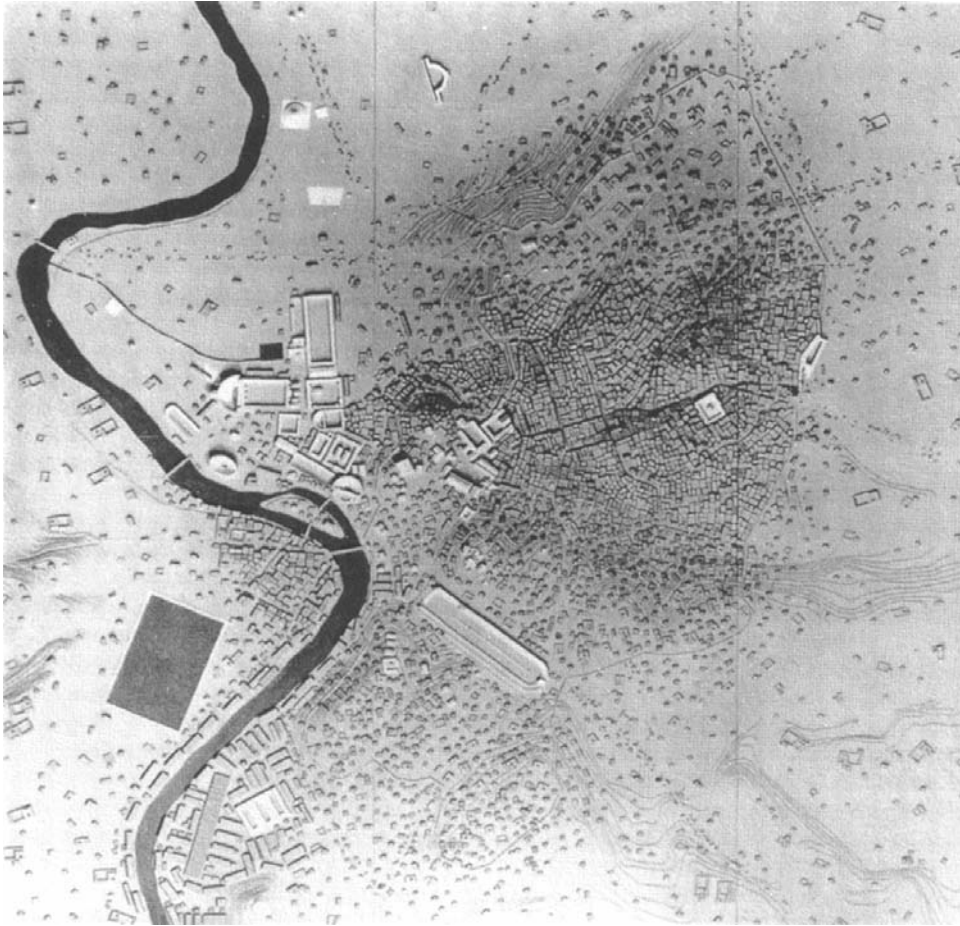


Figure 1. Model of Augustan Rome. Photo: J. Laurentius, courtesy the Antikenmuseum, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin.

frequently results from consensus planning involving the input of numerous diverse groups of politicians, users, government agencies, interest groups, designers, and planners. In contrast, some of the most powerful historic urban images were purposeful creations of single autocratic rulers.

Rome at the turn of the millennium presents an intriguing subject for the analysis of an urban image. The city was a true metropolis, comparable in size and complexity to many modern environments (fig. 1). In addition, at this moment in time, Rome came under the leadership of a strong individual. Augustus (63 B.C. – A.D. 14) forged the transition from the Roman Republic to the Roman Empire. An integral part of this change was the recasting of the Republican city on the Tiber River as an Imperial capital. Rome had to convey her importance as both the seat of a great State and the home of a

great man. Simply, her image had to outshine those of other cities in the Mediterranean. Along with art, architecture, and literature, Augustus treated the image of Rome as a tool for legitimizing and conveying both Imperial and personal might. Blessed with the advantages of power, wealth, and, above all, time, Augustus manipulated the cityscape to offer dynamic and meaningful sensorial experiences, imbued with directed meaning. In the end, Augustan Rome had a forceful and urban image.

THE ROMAN URBAN IMAGE

Modern observers rely heavily upon words and icons to convey urban meaning. The image of contemporary cities often is encapsulated in logos or slogans created by hired promoters: “The Big Apple” for New York, “The Poinsettia City by the Sea” for my hometown San Buena Ventura. These epithets complement “sound bites,” the stock phrases used to describe the condition of particular cities: Los Angeles as “the city in search of a center,” Houston as “the city without zoning.” Equally potent are select “visual bites,” those easily recognizable views repeatedly used in promotional literature such as the silhouette of Hagia Sophia for Istanbul or the Golden Gate Bridge for San Francisco.⁴ Popular culture provides additional shared perceptions, revealed in songs (“Chicago”), cinema (“Miami Vice”), and writing (*Slaves of New York*).⁵ Significantly, all these modern interpretations are received passively, divorced from the personal experience of a city. All lack direct interaction with an observer.

The Romans likewise described cities verbally. Histories, geographies, letters, and poems all preserve data about the urban environments of antiquity. These texts, however, tend to be largely descriptive or historical in nature. Furthermore, they most frequently focus on the great cities of the Hellenistic East.⁶ Such favoring of Greek-based urban images reflects the sense of cultural inferiority that permeated Republican society. In addition, verbal presentations were in themselves privileged, being written by and for the educated.

Because literacy was low in antiquity, the Romans employed other means to convey information about cities to a broader audience. Visual depictions of cityscapes are found in Roman paintings, mosaics, and reliefs.⁷ Although rarely accurate portraits of urban form, such pictorial representations do indicate the features and cultural priorities valued by contemporary observers. They succinctly reflect the contemporary perception of individual urban components and their interrelationships, as well as specific physical characteristics such as scale, textures, and colors.⁸ For example, the carver of an imperial relief from Avezano chose to emphasize a town’s external wall and gate, its regular plan, and the relationship between the highly for-

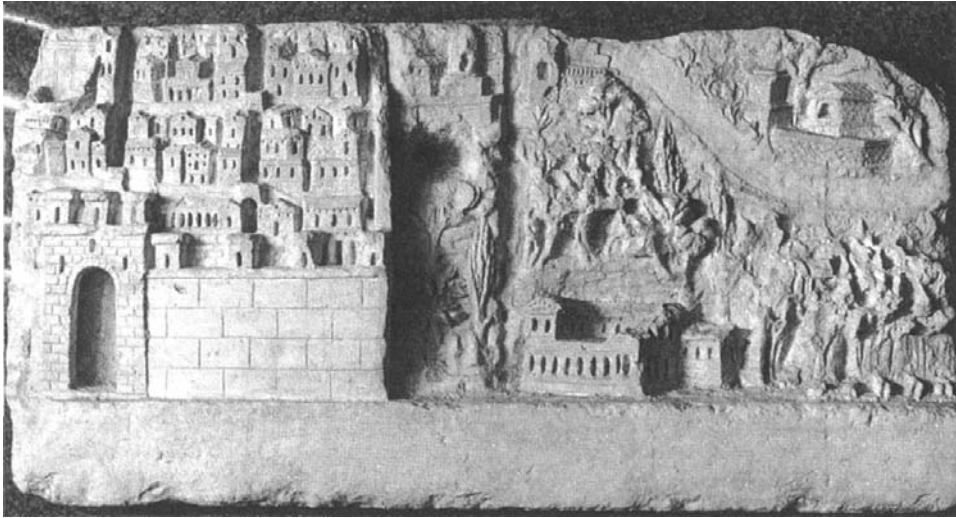


Figure 2. Imperial relief showing a walled Roman city, Palazzo Torlonia, Avezzano. Photo: DAIR 79.2757.

mal urban environment and the unstructured countryside (fig. 2).⁹ Overall, however, such verbal and visual representations had limited currency. Infrequently replicated or disseminated, they did not coalesce into a collective urban image for any specific city.

In general, the Romans had a much more circumscribed awareness of cities than modern observers. Few had the opportunity to read about other cities or about theories of urban design and meaning. Instead, they relied on first-hand knowledge and awareness. Travel by foot ensured that observers' interaction with urban environments was immediate and personal. Cities had few street names and no addresses; maps were rare.¹⁰ As a result, visitors were forced to conceptualize the placement of urban features and themselves in a relational manner based upon the location of monuments or other notable urban features. In the second century B.C., the playwright Terence has one character give another directions in the city:

SYRUS: You know that colonnade near the meat market, down that way?

DEMEA: Of course I do.

SYRUS: Go straight up the street past it. Then there's a turning going downhill; go straight down and you'll see a temple on this side and next to it that alley –

DEMEA: Which one?

SYRUS: Where there's a big fig tree.

DEMEA: I know

SYRUS: Go on through it.

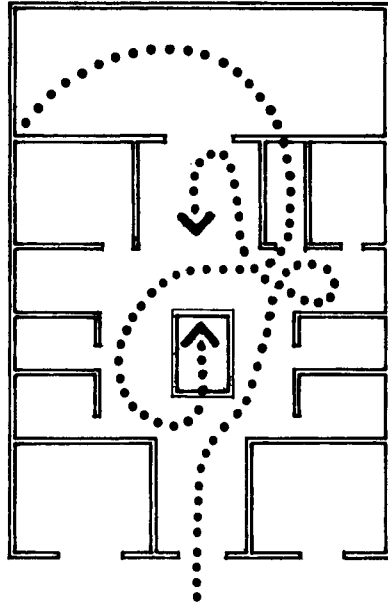


Figure 3. Diagram, movement through a Roman house of memory.

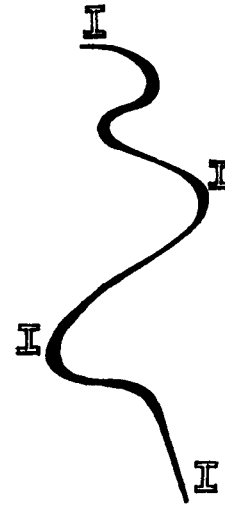


Figure 4. Diagram, urban locations of *imagines*.

- DEMEA: (*After some thought*) That alley hasn't got a way through.
- SYRUS: So it hasn't. What a fool I am. My mistake. Go back to the colonnade. Yes, this is a much shorter way and less chance of going wrong. Do you know Cratinus' house, that rich fellow's?
- DEMEA: Yes.
- SYRUS: (*Rapidly*) Go past it, turn left, straight up the street, come to the Temple of Diana, then turn right and before you come to the city gate just by the pond there's a small flour mill and a workshop opposite. . . . That's where he is.¹¹

As this example shows, good environmental memories were essential to navigate the convoluted byways of larger cities, and to understand the meaning woven into the urban fabric. For the Romans, the most enduring recollections resulted from the stimulation of as many senses as possible. Movement through a physical environment was one of the most powerful ways to learn and to remember.

The Romans were experienced readers of nonverbal texts. People of all classes read messages embedded in their surroundings.¹² On the most obvious level, artwork conveyed information of diverse types and every level of complexity. Based upon a shared religious pantheon, common ancestry, and familiar iconographic vocabulary, pictorial representations provided legible documents. In effect, the familiar representations in sculptures, coins, and

other art forms served as the *lingua franca* of the Roman world (fig. 102).¹³ Buildings and cityscapes were likewise texts meant to be read by people of all classes and backgrounds. Unlike artworks, however, these were to be read experientially by moving through, not merely looking at, the environments.¹⁴

Upperclass Romans received specific training in the reading of physical environments. All educated citizens studied rhetoric in preparation for public careers. As an aid in the memorization of long speeches, teachers of rhetoric instructed orators to fashion environments (*loci*) in their minds and to stock them with memorable objects (*imagines*) representing various concepts (fig. 3).¹⁵ Speakers placed *imagines* so as to reflect the interconnections and hierarchies within the speech being memorized. To recall the text, an orator simply imagined walking through the constructed mental environment “reading” the content-bearing images. He could achieve different effects by varying his path, safe in the knowledge that the relationships between *imagines* remained intact. Familiar with this mnemonic system, learned Romans were predisposed to look for an underlying, coherent narrative in built environments. In the first century A.D., Quintilianus noted that even a cityscape could form a usable *locus* for memorization with buildings, not objects, serving as *imagines* (*Inst.*11.2.21) (fig. 4). By further expansion of scale to a regional or imperial context, an entire city could likewise become a content laden object (*imago*) to be read by knowledgeable observers.

Romans with limited formal education were also expert readers of their surroundings. Oral traditions and daily experience provided ample training in environmental reading. Even more explicitly than rhetoric, story telling relied upon visual images as organizational cues.¹⁶ Familiar locales grounded the storyline in long epics; descriptions of environmental ambience set the tone for events to come. In the real world, observers learned about politics, religion, and cultural norms from the messages conveyed by physical objects. Throughout every Roman city, public as well as private displays of artwork, decorations, and architecture informed the citizenry. Not all conveyers of meaning were iconographical; styles, textures, and materials also carried a content. A sculpture of exotic-colored marble signaled wealth and provoked associations with the country of origin and other works using the same material. Similarly, the experience of moving through different spaces had meaning. Sequences of derelict buildings projected municipal poverty and lack of public pride; clean, safe streets signaled a stable government; juxtapositions of monuments identified telling relationships between patrons; and so on. In particular, ritual events such as parades or contemporaneous celebrations experientially linked together disparate urban sites, imbuing them with collective meaning.

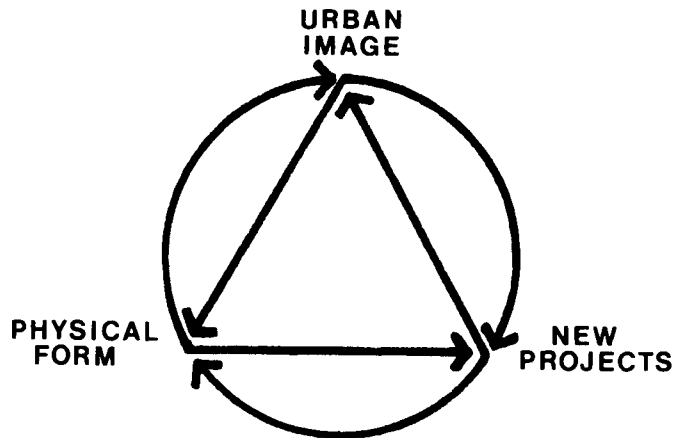


Figure 5. Diagram of codependency.

Bred on an animistic religion, the Romans readily associated spirits with inanimate objects and locations. Interacting on an intimate level, they anthropomorphized physical environments. Each crossroad, natural feature, and significant locale within the city had its own identifiable spirit of place or *genius loci*.¹⁷ These spirits enlivened both visits and memories of urban environments with human characteristics. As a result, a walk through a Roman city was punctuated by encounters with numerous well-known personas. Notably, the collective identification of each *genius loci* helped to leaven variations in the individual interpretation of experiences. The cities of the Roman world likewise had anthropomorphized spirits, though these *genii* were not as specifically defined as those for particular locales.¹⁸

Essential to understanding Roman urban images is the notion of cities as living entities. In antiquity, as in the present, the metaphor of the “living” city clarifies the conceptual difference between a single building and an urban environment or urban image. Architects and patrons often conceive individual structures as independent works, each with an identifiable, pristine appearance and content. Cities are more complex and organic. With the exception of planned new towns, urban environments result from hundreds of separate decisions made by different agents, at different times. Cumulatively, these isolated transformations create the impression of an independent, living entity that seems to grow and evolve according to its own life cycle. Evolution of the urban image likewise supports the notion that cities are animated. New developments in every sphere – from politics to technology, aesthetics to economics – continuously transform an existing urban image. A codependent cycle results, with each alteration to the physical environment affecting the conceptualization of the city and thus its image;

interpretation of the urban image, in turn, impacts the design, patronage, and meaning of new projects (fig. 5). The experience of a city is also biotic. Every aspect of a city cannot be experienced concurrently, so its identity takes shape after many encounters. Moving through urban environments on different days or years, under different climatic and political situations, observers create an urban image unique to their time and place, yet embodying change. In effect, an urban image lives and evolves in the same manner as a person. Like a human being, it changes form and personality over time, yet retains a unique character. Plutarch in the first century A.D. succinctly captured this aspect of the urban image,

A city, like a living thing, is a united and continuous whole. This does not cease to be itself as it changes in growing older, nor does it become one thing after another with the lapse of time, but is always at one with its former self in feeling and identity. (*Mor.* 599)

Each person reacts differently to different people based upon personalities, backgrounds, education, culture, and sheer chemistry. Similarly, each observer reacts slightly differently to the same urban experience. For ancient urban observers, the range of interpretations was somewhat broader than today due to the greater variations in class and education found within Roman society, and especially to the lack of a homogenizing mass media. The impressions of a Roman city formed by a slave walking barefoot on the rough streets naturally differed significantly from those of an educated senator carried in a litter; similarly diverse were the interpretations of a Greek from an eastern metropolis compared to those of a visitor from a village in the western provinces. Nevertheless, dissimilar reactions shared certain identifiable commonalities. Regardless of status, observers perceived the same interrelationships between individual projects, the same contrasts in scale, the same calibrated viewing angles, and the same manipulated sequencing of spaces in ancient cities. Most important, they evaluated such factors through the same general cultural filter.¹⁹ Of course, investigators in the twentieth century can never fully understand the impact a Roman city had on ancient observers; our cultural and perceptual frameworks are too foreign. Still, generalized reactions can be approximated. The sensorial responses of human observers have not changed dramatically over the centuries and thus can be calibrated.²⁰ Available physical evidence allows us to identify contrasts and repetitions, the average and the exceptional.

Similarly, sufficient documentation about Roman culture exists to permit reasoned evaluations of the meaning behind urban features. Easiest to trace are the motivations for the patronage of urban projects. Building is a conscious, costly, and enduring act. Requiring wealth and power to be imple-

mented, large-scale urban projects have left both archaeological and written remains documenting their content. For Roman society in particular, urban interventions were often highly politicized. Ancient patrons sought maximum return on their investments by using each structure to convey a desired meaning, as well as serve a specific function. Buildings were tools of self-aggrandizement, political competition, and State glorification. On the most personal level, the form, size, materials, and iconographic programs of private residences overtly communicated the social stature and sensibilities of the occupants.²¹ As the standing of certain individuals became inflated in the late Republic, they began to exploit larger and larger projects as transmitters of personal status and propaganda, including cityscapes. Simultaneously, the populace assumed a proprietary relationship to all buildings within the city, and to their encoded messages.

Because the Romans read environments experientially, patrons naturally considered how their urban projects conveyed meaning kinetically and haptically. Like words in a text, buildings do not stand alone, but have to be read as part of a phrase or sentence. Patrons of urban projects exploited a number of diverse design strategies to evoke the desired content and associations. Whenever possible, they tried to site their buildings carefully in relation to extant structures and to each other. Thus, designers were called upon to manipulate urban viewing angles and establish preferable sequences within the cityscape in order to elicit desired reactions.

The complete choreography of projects within a dense cityscape was, of course, impossible. Instead, patrons relied upon the readers of urban environments to create linkages between disparate projects based upon commonalities of form, material, scale, iconography, and, above all, narrative content. Drawing upon a shared heritage of myths, tales, and history, Roman observers associated singular urban projects together within narrative structures. Simply, they imposed familiar stories onto urban environments. Thus, a walk from the Tiber River, up the *Scalae Caci*, and across the Palatine Hill immediately recalled tales about the life of Romulus. The pedestrian moved from the riverbank where the founding Romulus washed up on shore, past the Lupercal cave where he was suckled by the she-wolf, and finally came to the rustic hut atop the hill alleged to be his residence (fig. 85). When various urban works shared iconographical programs or physical traits, observers were predisposed to create their own narratives to explain and reinforce such associations.

Observers in the twentieth century do not as readily read meaning in built form, relying instead upon words, numbering, and signage to transmit content. Not only is the experience of a modern city very different from that of an ancient city, but so are the tools and framework for interpretation. Com-