



The Portrayal of a City's Image by Young People

Supagtra Suthasupa

Faculty of Architecture,
Silpakorn University, Bangkok, Thailand

supakoy@yahoo.com

Abstract

It has been noted that young people are better at abstract thinking than adults; therefore, this paper investigates how young people portray the image of a city. Architecture students, aged 19 to 21, were selected to participate in the study, to assess their views on a part of the Bangkok Metropolitan Area, running from Silpakorn University to the Southern Bus Station. Each student was required to draw a map to help a traveler who wants to go to the Southern Bus Station. The results show that several representations styles are used by the students in order to explain their mental images to other people.

Keywords: image of a city, mental image, abstract thinking, adolescence

eISSN 2514-7528 © 2017 The Authors. Published for AMER ABRA by e-International Publishing House, Ltd., UK. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>). Peer-review under responsibility of AMER (Association of Malaysian Environment-Behaviour Researchers), ABRA (Association of Behavioural Researchers on Asians) and cE-Bs (Centre for Environment-Behaviour Studies), Faculty of Architecture, Planning & Surveying, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia. <https://doi.org/10.21834/jabs.v2i2.185>

1.0 Introduction

The term 'youths' in this study is used to describe those people who are young – in a period of their lives between childhood and maturity – that is, they are adolescents. It has been identified that young people build most of their abstract thinking abilities during this development stage, developing a significant ability to think abstractly and to draw conclusions from information available. Youths, and people of all ages, may provide different representations of a subject, which results from the process of abstract thinking. Examples of this may include the use of numerical notations, language and mental images. For this paper, in which I carry out a study of environmental design and planning, my interest is in the last aspect: mental images. A mental image is made up of a representation of the physical environment and its meaning and values, as perceived by an individual. It can be defined as an individual's mental interpretation of the environment, as known to the individual; therefore, mental images will differ due to age, gender, lifestyle and socio-cultural background. Images will vary from individual to individual but share features which result in a public mental image. Since it has been noted that young people are better at abstract thinking, it will be interesting to investigate the mental images they have with regards to the city they live in, and the environment around them. This paper examines images of a part of the Bangkok Metropolitan Area, as perceived and produced by selected young people, and thus explores the abstractions they use to explain their mental image of the city to other people. It is hoped that the outcomes of this study will provide some notations, though not a conclusion, about young people and the city, as well as the representation styles they use.

2.0 Literature Review

The concept of the image of a city was developed by Lynch (1960), in order to analyze the physical features selected and remembered by urban residents. He investigated three cities in the USA: Los Angeles, Jersey City and Boston, and discussed people's images of the cities in terms of five main elements: paths, edges, nodes, districts and landmarks. Paths refer to channels along which observers move; along these paths, other elements are arranged and related. Edges are the linear elements which act as boundaries between areas or as linear breaks in continuity. Districts are areas or sections of a city which carry some common characteristics. Nodes refer to transportation junctions and concentrations of activity, where people can enter, examples being places that offer a break in terms of transportation, a convergence of paths or an urban square. Landmarks are points of reference that an observer does not enter; they are simply physical objects used as reference points, such as towers, mountains and signs. It is assumed that a city with coherent elements is a pleasing city to live in, with little or no stress from disorientation, as an individual understands the relationship between all parts.

Lynch also defined three components for the analysis of each environmental image:

identity, structure and meaning. Identity accounts for the identification of objects – and that there is a distinction between objects which brings about a recognition of them as separable features. Structure refers to the spatial relationship of an object to an observer and to other objects. Meaning tends to be the understanding and emotion an observer attaches to selected features. However, Lynch's study is confined to the first two components, and excludes meaning. Subsequent studies have evaluated Lynch's concept; they have attempted not only to determine what features are selected, but also to answer why these features are selected. Harrison and Howard (1972) investigated the meaning component, proposing that meaning plays a significant role in the image people have of their city. Steinitz (1968) found that when the physical form and the activity in an environmental setting are congruent, the area will be better known and more meaningful to the residents.

3.0 Methodology

The participants in the study were requested to draw a map for a traveler who wants to go to the Southern Bus Station in Bangkok, from Silpakorn University's Bangkok Campus. The maps so obtained varied in their style and thus can be explored.

3.1 Participants

Twenty-one students attending the Environment and Human Behavior course at the Faculty of Architecture, Silpakorn University, were selected to participate in the study. Their ages vary from 19 to 21 years old, as they consist of fourth-year and fifth-year students. All have at least four years familiarity with the study area since their first enrollment at the University. During their first and second years, the students had to commute from Bangkok Campus to Nakornpathom Campus, a route which passes the Southern Bus Station, thus bringing a certain familiarity of the study area to the students. It should be noted that the small number of participants means that a definitive conclusion cannot be drawn, only a tentative one, one that may provide notations to a wider study.

3.2 Study Area

The study area is on the western side of Bangkok Metropolitan Area (Fig. 1), and from Silpakorn University, Bangkok Campus (A), to the Southern Bus Station (B) is about ten kilometers. Along the road to the Station are temples, government offices, department stores, restaurants, retail shops and residential areas. There are also a few major intersections along the route.

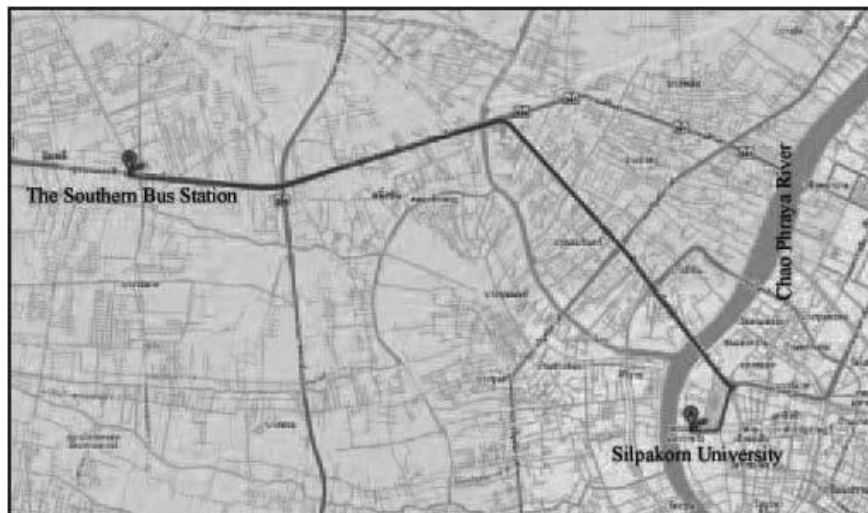


Figure 1: The Route from Silpakorn University (A) to the Southern Bus Station (B)
Source: (Google Maps, 2010)

3.3 Procedure

Each student was asked to draw a mental map on a blank sheet of paper, showing the route from the University to the Southern Bus Station. They could spend as much time as they needed to complete the drawings.

4.0 Results and Discussions

The students' abstractions of the city vary in terms of the style of representation, as previously mentioned. They employ symbols, signs, language, drawings, maps and diagrams to interpret the environment in the study area, and these representations can be grouped into two major types, based on their similarities: one type follows Lynch's mental map format and the other does not.

The first group, conforming to Lynch's concept, consists of fourteen drawings out of the twenty-one. They are basically sketched maps or plans, and most of them illustrate four elements that build the city's image; very few include a district. Paths are used to give direction to the destination, along with nodes and landmarks which provide points of interest. Interestingly, all the students selected department stores as their reference points, which might be due to their association with the space as a social arena, as well as the architectural scale of the buildings. Edges are demonstrated by the drawing of the Chao Phraya River and canals. All the elements on this first group of mental maps are believed to contain three components of the city's image: identity, structure and meaning. The

department stores and other buildings and features are selected for inclusion in the mental images due to their appearance, something that distinguishes them from their surroundings; that is, they have an identity. The selected intersections can be spatially related to other buildings and people; representing structure. Also, people will understand and experience emotions and feelings about the temples drawn; representing meaning.

These five elements are the result of an extracted reality of the physical environment in which the students regularly employ signs, symbols and words to explain their abstract thoughts. Figure 2 shows one sample of a mental image which corresponds to Lynch's concept. This type of representation is commonly used and has been well examined.

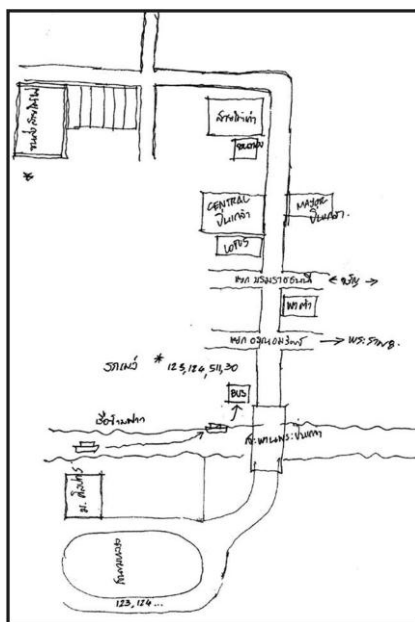


Figure 2: Sample of a Mental Image Corresponding to Lynch's Concept

The other group of images differs from the first as it does not rely heavily on sketched maps or plans of the area. The seven drawings in this group differ from one other. Two show cross-sections with path directions, while one of these has a plan accompanying a cross-section (Fig. 3). Both depict some elements of the city on the cross-section drawings, such as nodes and edges, in order to facilitate travel. Another four drawings use a diagram technique, but differ in their details. One diagram has a flowchart, with information boxes telling the traveler how to go, step by step, to the Bus Station (Fig. 4).

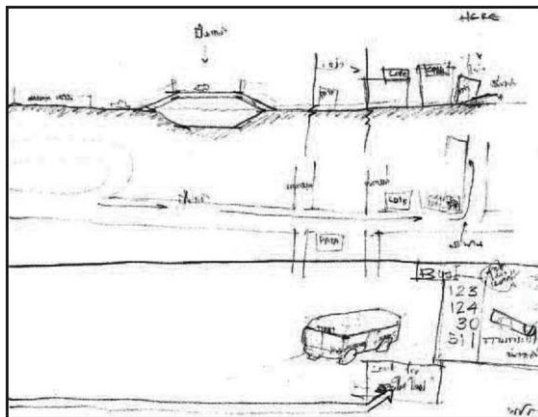


Figure 3: A Drawing with a Cross-Section and a Plan

This diagram employs a lot of language to explain landmarks, nodes, edges and paths, similar to a mental map, together with extensive detail along the route. This map resembles how we talk to friends, rather than how we would draw a map for them; however, the need for a diagram accounts for its picture-like sense. The other three diagrams are a combination of cartoon drawings, symbols, signs and language using Lynch's elements of a city (consisting of nodes, landmarks and paths), along with stepwise instructions on how to reach the destination (Fig. 5). The last drawing is a mix of a mental map and a diagram (Fig. 6) and the mental map describes several modes of transportation a traveler should use, in the correct order and explained in the diagram, to get to the Bus Station. Its elements include nodes, landmarks, edges and paths. However, the directions given are too complicated and therefore not practical. Table 1 presents two types of representation, subgroups and their elements.

These last seven drawings suggest that although the form of mental representation does not directly correspond to Lynch, the basic concept of a city's image is still applied to the students' interpretation of their perceived environment. For instance, the lines in the diagrams are analogous to paths in the mental maps, and the cartoons, symbols, signs and words about the places are equivalent to nodes and landmarks. The descriptions in the boxes exhibit meanings and structures of the city's image, and the identity component is shown as the elements selected to compose the diagrams.

For both groups of representations, the spatial factor of the images is the key differentiation between them. The first group takes the drawing of an area or map as its major presentation; whereas the second group employs maps less as a means of representation. Nonetheless, both groups present abstractions of the literal entity, those that the students employ to express the environment as known to them.

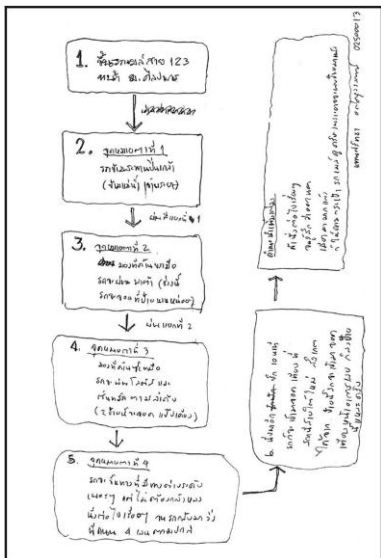


Figure 4: A Diagram Showing a Flowchart

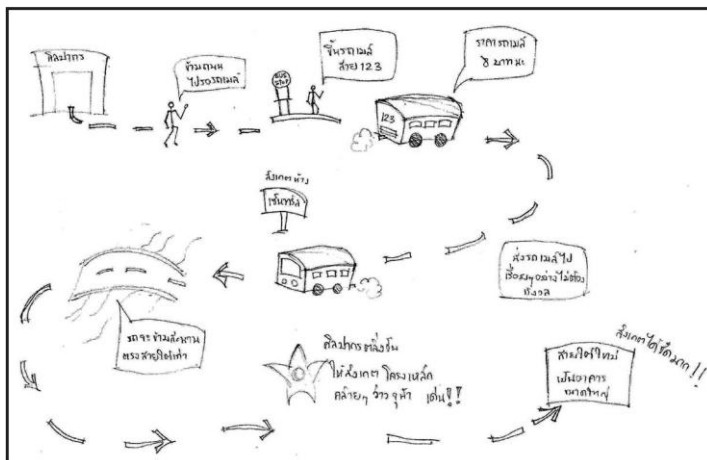


Figure 5: A Combination of Cartoon Drawings, Symbols, Signs and Language

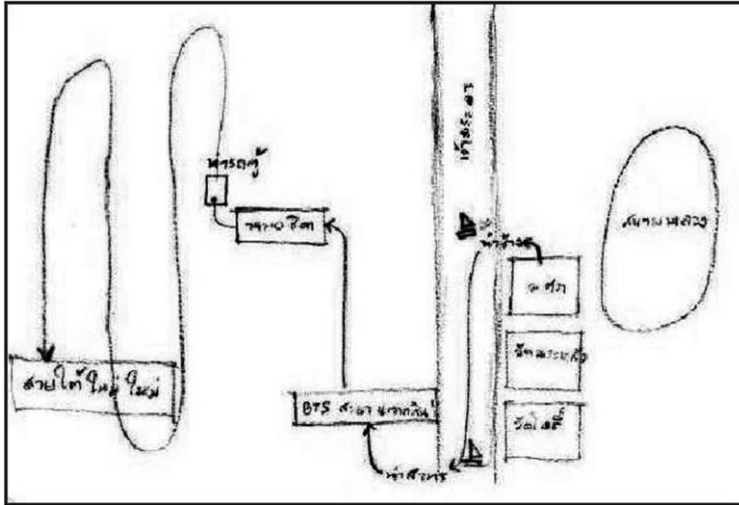


Figure 6: A Combination of a Map and a Diagram

Table 1: Two Types of Representation, Subgroups and their Elements

The Elements of the City's Image	Group I Conforming to Lynch's Concept (Fig.2)	Group II Not Rely heavily on Maps or Plans			
		A Drawing with a Cross-Section and a Plan (Fig. 3)	A Diagram Showing a Flowchart (Fig. 4)	A Combination of Cartoon Drawings, Symbols, Signs and Language (Fig. 5)	A Combination of a Map and a Diagram (Fig. 6)
Path	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Node	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Landmark	✓		✓	✓	✓
Edge	✓	✓	✓		✓
District	✓				

In addition, the variety of mental representations used by the students supports the view that young people apply abstract thinking, which is unlimited in its alternatives, outcomes and hypotheses, but at the same time logical and systematic. This out-of-the-box thinking applies creativity to many facets, and the information gleaned may imply that the design and planning of space by young people can be boundless in terms of concepts, because

young people are likely to utilize their abstract thinking to interpret the environment. The high level of abstraction employed by the youths allows them to understand the numerous possibilities available in terms of space design.

Moreover, it can be speculated that the mental images display the relationship between the students and the parts of the city that adhere to them. The elements of the city mentioned in the mental representations may infer the associations the students have with such elements, either through physical or mental attachment. For example, department stores were selected by all the students, so it may be conjectured that these places are familiar to the students, since they are meeting places. Furthermore, the clear mental representations given by the students may signal their legibility of the city, as Lynch suggested.

5.0 Conclusion

This study examined the images of a part of the western Bangkok Metropolitan Area, as perceived by a small number of young people; that is, twenty-one architecture students from Silpakorn University. The outcomes are not meant to help draw any specific conclusions, but to help explore some possibilities in terms of the abstract thinking of a group of young people in Bangkok that may be employed to explain their mental images of the city to other people. The information obtained may be useful in helping to understand how young people perceive their urban environment, their relationships with the city's elements, and the types of mental representation they create. This paper has applied Lynch's concept of a city's image to describe the urban area known to the students, and to explain the mental representations that include less spatial information than a mental map usually contains. Piaget's theory of cognitive development is inferred regarding the high level of abstraction that the students apply to a variety of mental representations. Indeed, further investigation is needed in terms of studying young people and their relationship with and perception of the physical environment around them.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the students in the Environment and Human Behavior class during the first semester of 2010, for the invaluable information they provided and for their patience.

References

Cambridge Dictionaries Online. Retrieved [30 September 2010] from http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/map_1

Finke, R.A. (1989). Principles of mental imagery. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Google Map. Retrieved [30 September 2010] from <http://maps.google.com>

Harrison, J.D. and Howard, W.A. (1972) The role of the meaning in the urban image. *Environment and Behavior* 4: 389-411.

Huitt, W., & Hummel, J. (2003) Piaget's theory of cognitive development. *Educational Psychology Interactive*. Valdosta, GA: Valdosta State University. Retrieved [28 September 2010] from <http://www.edpsycinteractive.org/topics/cogsys/piaget.html>

Ittelson, W., Proshansky, H., Rivlin, L. and Winkel, G. (1974) *An introduction to environmental psychology*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

Jung, Carl G. (1971) *Psychological Types*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Lowe, Richard K. (1993). Diagrammatic information: techniques for exploring its mental representation and processing. *Information Design Journal* 7 (1): 3–18.

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

Mechelson, W. (1966) An empirical analysis of urban environmental perception. *Journal of American Institute of Planners* 32: 355-360.

Piaget, J. (1972) *The psychology of the child*. New York: Basic Books.

Pocock, D. and Hudson, R. (1978) Environmental cognition in cross-cultural perspective. In *Environmental Knowing*, edited by G.T. Moore and R.G. Golledge. Stoudsburg, PA: Dowden, Hutchinson & Ross.

Santrock, J.W. (2008) *A topical approach to life span development*. New York: NY: McGraw-Hill.

Steinitz, C. (1968) Meaning and the congruence of urban form and activity. *Journal of American Institute of Planners* 34: 233-248.

The American Heritage Dictionary. (1983) New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.

The American Heritage Medical Dictionary. (2007) New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.