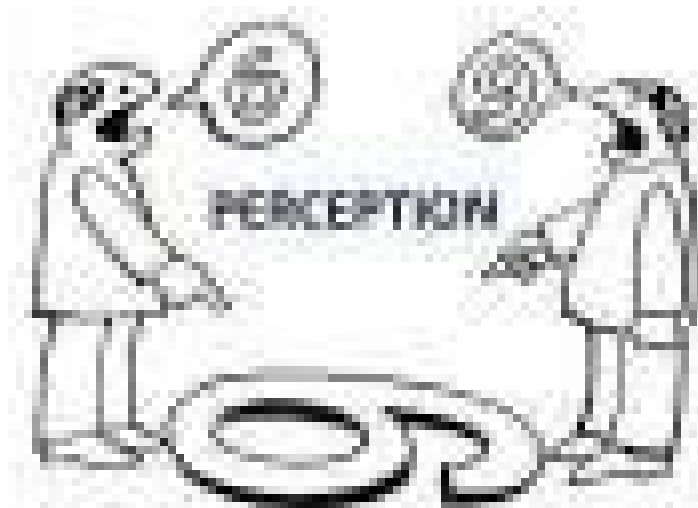# The Perceptual Dimension of Urban Design

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Design Fifth stage

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Introduction:

Awareness and appreciation of environmental perception and, in particular, the perception and experience of 'place' is an essential dimension of urban design. Since the 1960s, an interdisciplinary field of environmental perception has gradually developed.

WHAT IS PERCEPTUAL DIMENSION OF URBAN DESIGN?

Perceptual means the **process of becoming aware** of physical objects, phenomenon etc. through **senses**.

- Thus the perceptual dimension in urban design embraces the **images**, **experiences** and **meanings** that people attach to the <u>built environment</u>.

- The Perceptual Dimension of urban design explores **how people perceives environment and experience places**

- **This lecture is divided in three main parts:**

1. Environmental perception

2. Construction of place in terms of place identity, sense of place and placelessness

3. Place differentiation and place theming

1-Environmental Perception

Both the environment and we are impacted by each other. In other words We affect the environment and are affected by it.

Perception involves the gathering, organizing, and making sense of information about the **environment……. Urban Environment**

- The information collected through Sight, Sound, Smell and touch which gives the clue to see the world around us.

- **Sensation and perception** are the two distinct process involve when the information is gathered by Vision, Hearing, Smell, Touch
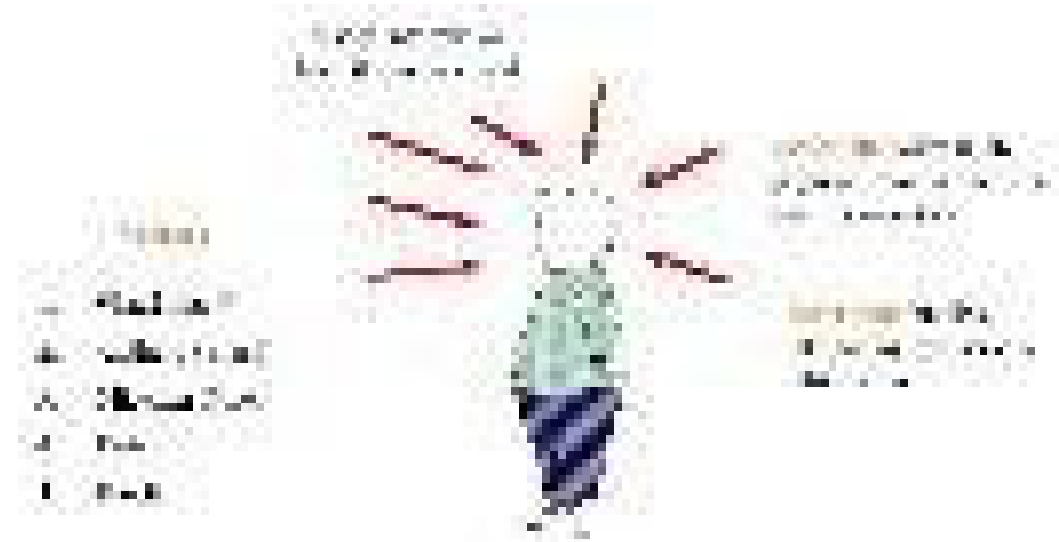
In other words, senses are the physiological basis of perception. Perception of the same senses may vary from one person to another because each person's brain interprets stimuli differently based on that individual's learning, memory, emotions, and expectations.

The **four** most valuable senses in interpreting and sensing the environment are:

•Vision**: the dominant sense**, vision provides more information than the other senses combined. <u>Orientation</u> in space is achieved visually. Visual perception is highly complex **relying** on <u>distance, color, shape, textural and contrast gradients</u>

•Hearing: acoustic space has no boundaries comparing to visual space. Hearing is information poor but emotionally rich which we are strongly aroused by for example scream, music, thunder ……

•Smell: It is not well developed but it is emotionally richer then the hearing

•Touch: In the urban context, much of our experience of texture comes through our feet

Place (Environmental) Images

The "environment" can be considered as a **mental construct**, an environmental image, created and valued differently by each individual.
"Images" are the result of processes through which personal experience and values filter the tank of environment motivations.

Thus **place image** is a combination of **place identity** and how the **place is perceived** by the individual (it includes the individual set of feelings about and impressions of the place)

Environmental perception depend on factors such as <u>age, gender, ethnicity, lifestyle, length of residence in an area, and on the physical, social and cultural environment in which a person lives and was raised</u>.

Environmental images require three attributes according to Lynch:
 • Identity
 • Structure
 • Meaning

According to Lynch, cities have **districts, landmarks, paths, nodes and edges** that were easily identifiable and easily grouped into an overall pattern that lead to what we call —**Image ability** – it is the quality of a physical object which gives it a high probability of reminding a strong image in any given observer.

None of Lynch's elements exist in isolation

•All combine to provide overall image: which make the observer moves from images at street level to those of the neighborhood, and then **the city and beyond**

Beyond The Image Of City

Mental understanding of the essence of the city that every individual creates after one is directly or indirectly colliding with the environment of the city.
There are **different ways different groups** in **different place** **structure their city images**.
Some cities are more legible to its inhabitants than others. While some cities were highly legible they were legible in different ways.

Legibility
the extend to which the cityscape can be '**read**'. People who move through the city engage in way-finding. They need to be able to recognize and organize urban elements into a coherent pattern.

Beyond The Image Of City

Comparing Milan and Rome, Milan was constructed by clearly connected paths relating to their city's radial street pattern whereas Rome was constructed around land marks and edges associated with the city's historical buildings, its hills and the river Tiber.
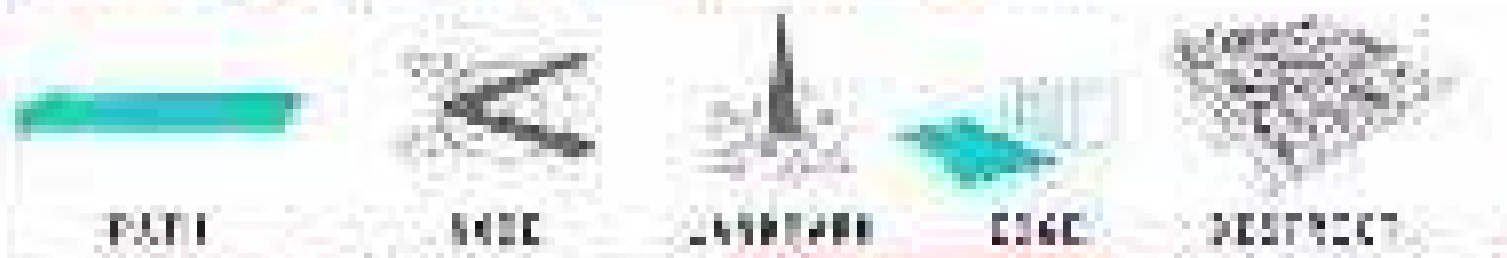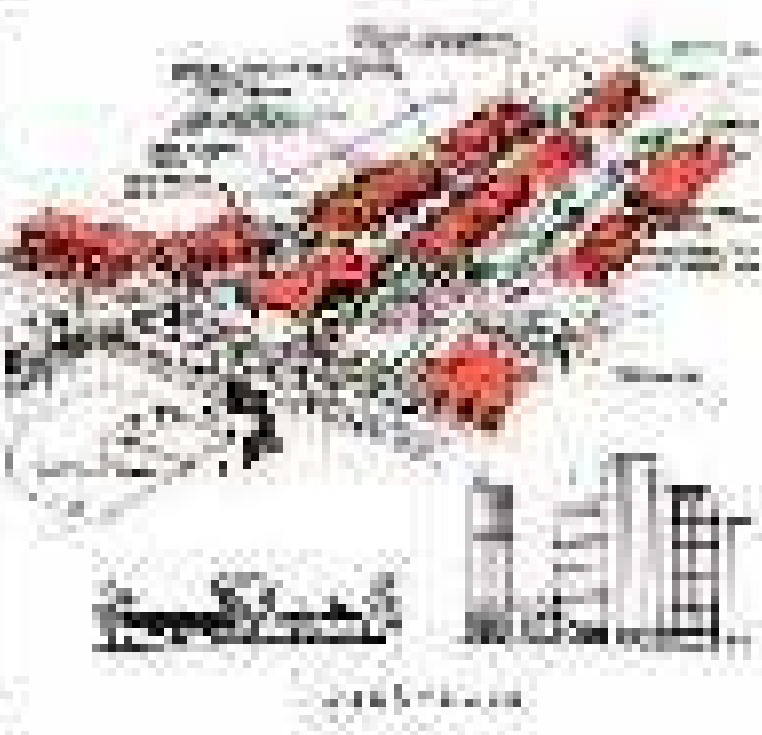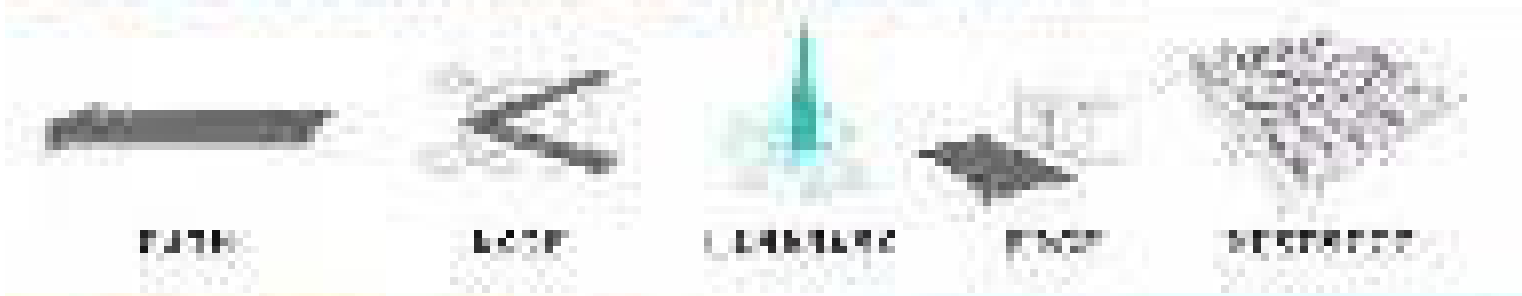

Rome

Milan

THE ELEMENTS OF A CITY

PATH NODE LANDMARK EDGE DISTRICT

THE ELEMENTS OF A CITY

PATH   EDGE   LANDMARK   NODE   DISTRICT
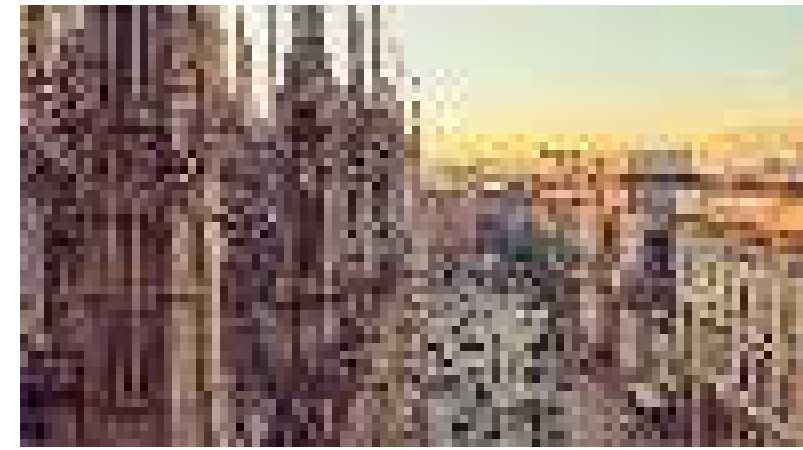
THE ELEMENTS OF A CITY

Environmental Meaning and Symbolism:

Symbolism is the practice of representing things with sign and giving them meaning.

The symbolic role of buildings and environment: is a key part of relationship between society and environment.

Reading an environment: involves understanding how different things come to different people and how meanings change. As society changes, so does signification.

Economic and commercial forces are highly influential in creating the symbolism of the built environment.

Three ways of expressing a building's function or meaning have been identified by American architect (Robert Venturi):

The 'Las Vegas way' – placing a '**big sign'** in front of a 'little building'.

The 'decorated shed' – designing a simple building form and then **covering the facade** with signs.

The 'duck' – making the building's overall form visually express or **symbolize its function** (a deliberate strategy in attempts at iconic sign)

2. Construction of place in terms of place identity, sense of place and placelessness

Sense of place takes into account **the social and geographical context** of place bonds and the sensing of places, such as **aesthetics and a feeling of dwelling**.

Place, as opposed to **space**, expresses a strong affective **bond between a person and a particular setting**.
In other words, **place is mixed with human values and principles**.

As a result, place is a particular space which is **covered with meanings and values by the users**. Places play an essential and vital role in human life. Each place has its own unique character that is an important issue in social science.

place identity

PLACELESSNESS

The **absence** of quality of being distinctive and meaningful place is called **placelessness**.

Lacking of a proper place for people, things etc., lacking of a geographic orientation.

- with mass communication, and increasingly high technology, places become more and more similar, so that locations lose a **distinctive sense of place**.
- Essentially, placelessness **is the loss of a unique sense** of place and increasing uniformity.
- When space is filled with cultural meanings, places (cultural, varied, relative) emerge. **But when landscapes are not used by people who live in them placelessness results.**
- **Appreciation** of placelessness provides a framework of reference for urban design.

PLACELESSNESS

Factors which contribute towards contemporary sense of placelessness are:

•**Globalization:** The world is increasingly interconnected, with centralized decision-making exploiting efficiencies and economies of scale and standardization. Globalization leads to an erosion of place meaning.

•**Mass Culture:** With globalization has come 'mass' culture, emerging from processes of mass production, mass marketing and mass consumption, which homogenize and standardize cultures and places, transcending, crowding-out, even destroying local cultures.

•**Loss of (attachment to) territory:** Placelessness is also a reaction to the loss, or absence, of environments that people 'care' about because they do not feel that they belong and no longer care for their environment

3- Place Differentiation And Place-theming.

Place differentiation means to **create a new place which represents the whole city**.

It becomes **identity** of the city.

Place differentiation **distinguishes** one place from other.

Historical places **conserve** the identity of the city.

Physical landscape is more **responsive and amendable** to bring new changes as compare to economic structure of city.

Important dimensions are **place marketing and city branding** in city development.

Place Marketing

- Imagineering-manufacturing place identities-involves <u>careful use of symbols/themes</u> (often drawn from existing places) to enhance place distinctiveness. **At a large scale, this is termed as place marketing.**

- Place marketing involves **developing** such images for **tourism and economic development** purpose.

- To carry out **physical changes** to place through real estate development, external rehabilitation and establishment of new attractions, activities and events. **This may be done by the help of icons.**

- **Iconic buildings** provide iconic identity to city. Similar buildings with similar design losses the distinction and identity of the city

- Most **architectural icons** are **landmarks** in the sense of being physically distinctive and identifiable within an urban landscape.

- Distinctive buildings symbolize their city and thus the attraction of new iconic buildings is to create similar distinctiveness quickly.
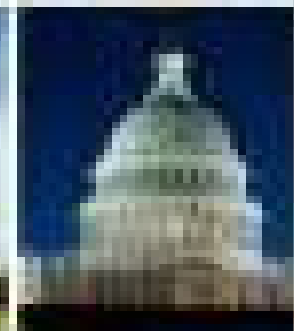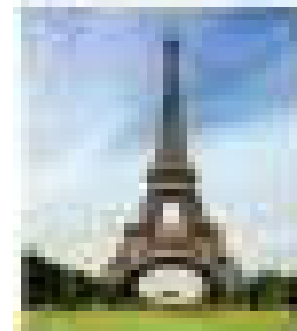
Place Theming

designing and decorating restaurants, hotels, shopping malls, casinos and even small towns to exaggerate stereotypes and **recreate lost places**.
Depending on extent of existing source material, place theming can involve <u>reinventing</u> or <u>inventing</u> places.

<u>Reinventing</u> places start from a basis in reality, but involve a significant change, distortion and loss of authenticity.

<u>Inventing</u> places spring from the creative minds of authors, artists, architects, designers and imaginers
Place theming can occurs in a **variety of settings** including shopping malls, historic district or tourist destinations

Villagio Mall, Doha, Qatar- Place Theming

Invented Place

a purposeful thematisation which is now widespread, extending from shopping malls to festival markets to urban waterfronts.

No doubt that invented place, <u>is a welcome correction to modernism's</u> obsession but it also **caused forgetting of the past and starting over a clean slate**

On the other hand its feature is that it creates reality out of fantasy in many ways.

It is successful because it adheres certain principles of sequential experience and storytelling, creating an appropriate and meaningful sense of place in which both activities and memories are individual and shared

The Palace Old Town Development-hotel, Dubai

Criticism Of Place Theming And Invented Places

Invented places and place theming provides opportunities for urban design and placemaking, but the practices raise a number of place-making **issues** and there has been such critical comment:
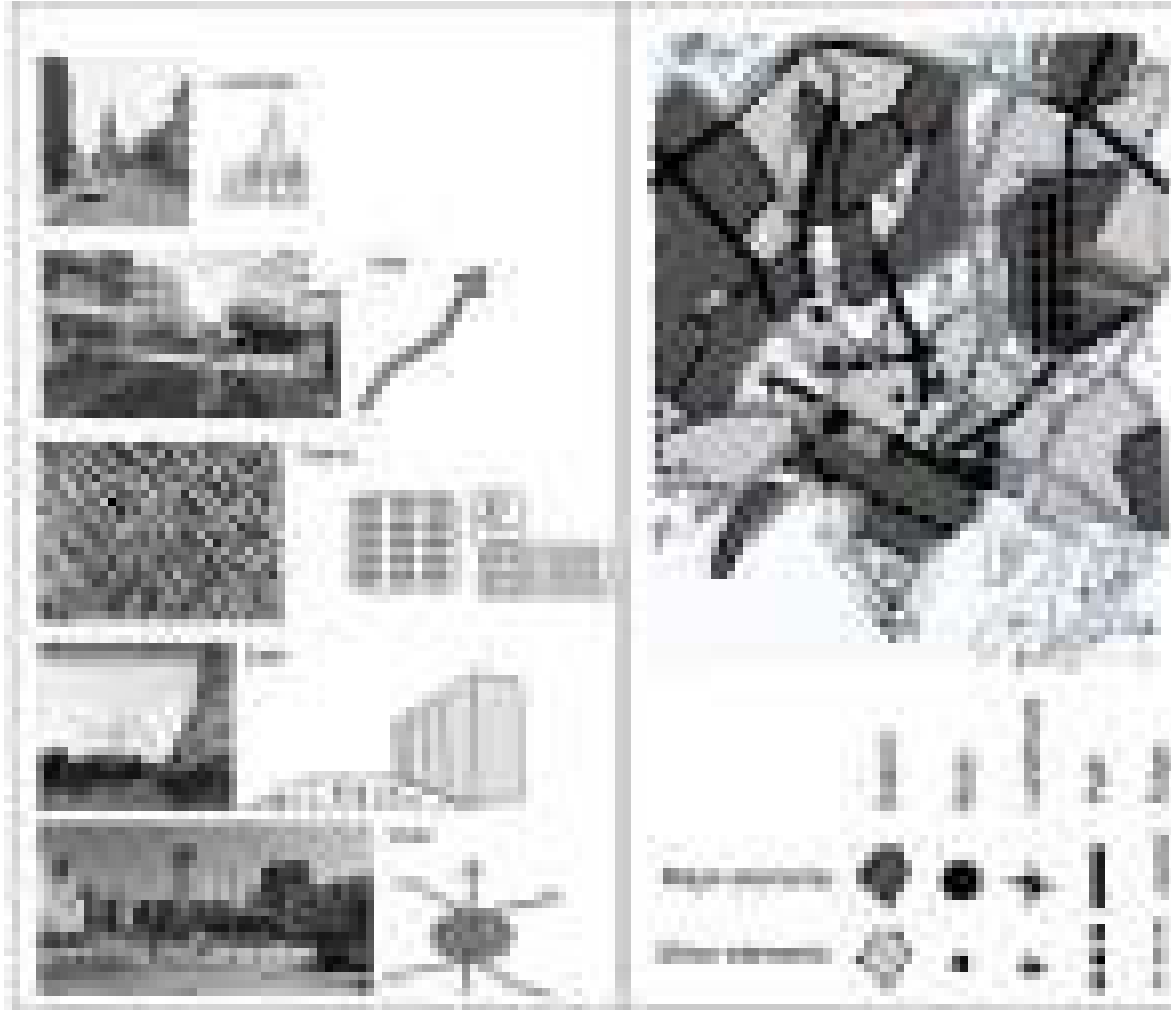
•**Superficiality**: It is a superficial attention that undermines and even destroys, rather than reinforces, the real place identity.

•The **commodification** of place: By seeking to sell or market the place, place-theming actions, and place-marketing images, necessarily commodity (articles for trade), and misrepresent the place, by making its exchange value its primary quality.

•**Simulacrum (**representation **) and the real**: There are situations when the public is unable to distinguish between what is real and what is not.

•**Authenticity**: Sense of place may be 'authentic' (true) and 'genuine'(unaffected) or, equally, 'inauthentic', 'contrived' or 'artificial'. Development that copies or draws explicit reference from historical precedent as 'false' and lacking authenticity.

CONCLUSION

The value of the perceptual dimension of urban design is the emphasis placed on people and how they perceive; value and both draw meaning from and add meaning to the urban environment.

Places that are real to people invite and require involvement- both intellectual and emotional-and provide a sense of psychological connectedness.

Urban designers thus need to learn how to make better people places by observing existing places and through dialogue with their users and stakeholders.

thank you