

The image shows a modern architectural complex with curved, metallic-clad buildings. In the foreground, there is a waterfront plaza with wooden benches and a planter bed filled with yellow and purple flowers. A large tree with green and yellow leaves is on the right. The sky is clear blue.

Ryder

**Imageability, sensory perception and  
place attachment**  
Part of the Urban Design and Mental Health series

A Ryder Alliance publication by Ryder Architecture

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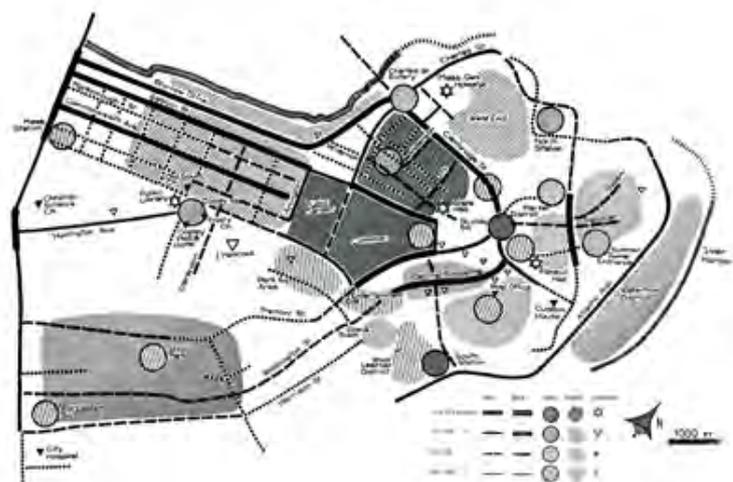


Our cities, towns and neighbourhoods can positively influence our emotions through rich sensory experiences. These experiences help us form an impression of a place in our minds. This article explores how the legibility and memorability of place can contribute to mental wellbeing.

### Psychological maps

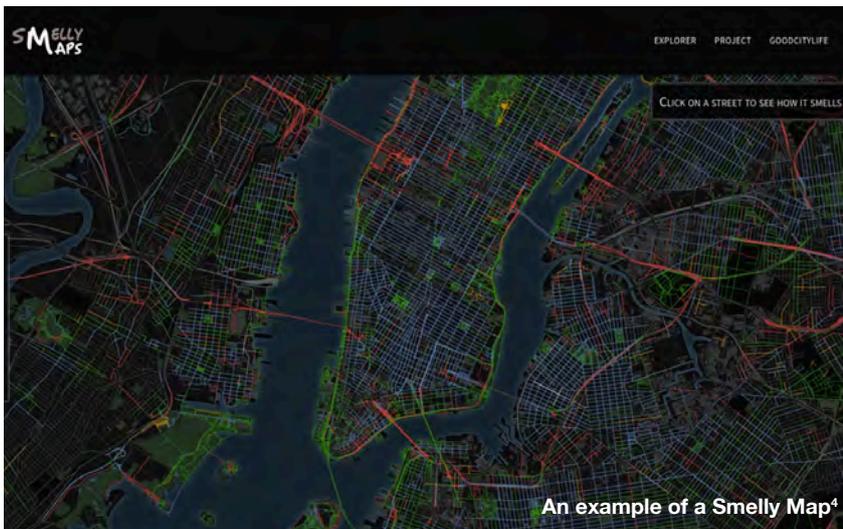
Kevin Lynch's book, *The Image of the City*,<sup>1</sup> describes how our experience of place is far more personal and complex than the maps found in an atlas or, more recently, on GPS devices. In Lynch's study, a psychological map consists of paths, landmarks, regions (character areas), edges (barriers) and nodes (intersections).

We use these elements to navigate and build up a memorable image of a place, which leads to place attachment. Good imageability enables people to feel at home and increases community wellbeing.



Map of Boston<sup>2</sup>

“Every Londoner has had long attachment to some parts of the city, which brings to mind a flood of associations. Over the years, London has been built and maintained in a way that it is imaginable, ie, that mental maps of the city are clear and economical of mental effort.”<sup>3</sup>



### Sensory experiences

Recognisable elements consist not only of visual cues but also of a range of sensory experiences. A landmark, in a psychological map, can be something more abstract than a monument or significant building. The smells of a coffee shop spilling out onto the street could be a psychological landmark, so could the sound of a railway station or the texture of an old stone wall. The five sensory systems introduced by Gibson<sup>5</sup> are:

- Visual (far)
- Auditory (far)
- Taste-smell (near)
- Haptic (near, aka touch)
- Basic-orientating

Smell is closely associated with memory, and ambient scents can elicit positive or negative emotional responses which become part of our mental maps. Natural sounds, such as water or birds, can be restorative.

The Good City Life project<sup>6</sup> has created Happy Maps. This provides an alternative to GPS systems, such as Google Maps, which prioritise the shortest route. Happy Maps also considers the joys that can be encountered on route, based on research into which urban scenes make us happy.

The team of researchers has also initiated ‘Smelly Maps’, mapping the wide range of positive and negative associations with smells in two sample cities (London and Barcelona), and ‘Chatty Maps’ which explores the spectrum of sounds people are exposed to in cities and the impact on wellbeing. The Good City Life project recognises the importance of pleasant routes through cities and has analysed what constitutes one.

### Place attachment

Community involvement, for example, through cooperative or community led design, can be an excellent accelerator for imageability.

This helps to improve wellbeing through place attachment, sense of ownership, maintenance and social cohesion. Neighbourhoods with greater social capital have generally been found to produce beneficial effects upon the mental health of residents.<sup>7</sup>



## Conclusion

When we pick apart successful places, variety seems to be a common thread. Different types of views – including vistas, surprise views and channelled views – create mystery and complexity, allowing wayfinding to become an adventure. Tactile surfaces can assist with safety and wayfinding, and different textures can add richness and interest to journeys.

**However, concealments should be carefully considered to avoid associated fears of crime, and material choice needs to consider the needs of different user groups to be safe and inclusive.**

Urban environments can be noisy spaces, and introducing sounds of nature (eg birds and water) can have restorative effects.

Generally, in the design of places, we opt to minimise and mitigate harmful elements rather than curating environments which positively benefit wellbeing.<sup>8</sup> This is likely because mitigating health and safety hazards is easier than instigating beneficial elements. Great places tend to grow organically and over time, often centuries. Therefore, trying to convert these great places into the logical reasoning behind them, so they can be recreated, is challenging and requires a deep level of understanding and skill. It is important, as designers, that we take on this challenge. This article hopes to open the conversation within Ryder and across the industry.

We would love to hear from you if you are interested in collaborating.



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