Assessment of urban identity through a matrix of cultural landscapes

Maryam Ziyaee

Dipartimento di Architettura e Studi Urbani, Politecnico di Milano, Via Bonardi 3, 20133, Milano, Italy

A R T I C L E   I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

Identity of a given place arises from a combination of social and cultural characteristics of the related community which reincarnated in physical shapes and forms of the urban locality. Soaring growth of contemporary cities beside recent transformations of traditional urban spaces have been caused some gaps between physical features of urban environments and their cultural identities. This issue, accordingly, supports the need of special attentions to the cultural and social aspects of transforming places under a process of urban design/planning. We provide here an analysis framework with emphasis to the identity of the place from the cultural aspects of the settlement. This technique mainly concerns to identify cultural features of the urban spaces and preserve them during further urban regeneration. To this aim, representative factors of the places identity are hybridized with the characteristic elements of cultural landscape and collected as a matrix of cultural landscapes, CLs. We convinced from the analysis that it may be oversimplification if solely attention to the physical features for improving quality of urban identity whiles it is affected by some nonphysical aspects, as well.

Provided matrix of CLs is also implemented for a test case. Some factors of cultural landscape are discovered and the related effects on urban identity of designing place are discussed in micro and macro scales. Analysis highlighted some tangible/intangible characteristics of the studied public urban area which have to be critically considered through further transformation of the place. Accordingly, a preliminary design of the example studying area is suggested as a green linkage space between natural area in countryside and cultural realms in central parts of Mashhad city.

1. Introduction

Among urban areas, public urban spaces are realms that are extensively used by citizens. They can potentially take important roles in enhancing social qualities of human life by making a similar sense of place for the urban community. To this aim, the necessity of identity in urban public spaces is undeniable. Identity, from the social point of view, describes the “uniqueness” of an object from very different (i.e. personal, social, ethical and even political) perspectives and purposes (Kaymaz, 2013). In urban studies, identity is a translation of the distinct characteristics of the place or a mixture of the individuals as a total object (Ujang, 2012). Then, it is not exaggerating to say that urban identity is the way of representing natural, cultural and manmade components of the city. Through the concept of place identity one discusses what a place actually looks like and which common elements shape beholder's individual images of the place. Recognition of such distinctive physical and/or visual features can aid in further assessments of the place identity (Carmona, Tiesdell, Heath, & Oc, 2010). However, keeping urban identity, especially in modern era, is challenging for urban planners, designers and other related experts. This work particularly focuses on assessment of the place identity in transforming contemporary public spaces.

A well-designed urban space is the one with meanings, memories and identities for their users. Notion of urban identity can be seen from different spatial, social, cultural and economic points of view (Kaymaz, 2013). Besides, we should pay attention to the historical aspects of the city as well as the actions representing modern urban lifestyle in contemporary era. This issue may proceed in micro and/or macro dimensions and has to be considered as a correlated system of components in a comprehensive totalitarian approach.

By emerging industrialization and modernism in nineteenth/twentieth centuries, a number of contemporary problems in the cities appear through different urban layers. In particular, urban environments extensively influenced by two major phenomena of urbanization and globalization. Urbanization through standard structures of manmade objects causes some visual/non-visual complexities of the ways that constructions deal with cultural and natural features of the environment. This phenomenon can significantly influence identity of the urban area (Kaymaz, 2013). Lack of connectivity between physical landscape and the related broader of physical, cultural and emotional context is evident in some contemporary cities (Relph, 1976). Ujang (2012) shows weakening of local identity may arise from uniform planning of the places due to commodification purposes. Designers
commonly deal with the challenge of creating outdoor environments as groups of outlines for new urban developments. A usual solution to this issue is the use of buildings, as isolated objects, standing in the landscape between open spaces (Trancik, 1986). Trancik (1986) believe that unshaped anti-spaces are the result of urban planning and design in modern era. He said that master plan of the recent developments create some unshaped spaces which do not provide the users any sense of place. Besides, shortage of social qualities in open spaces behind the fragmented forms of urban spaces may cause some losses of traditional characteristics of urban public spaces.

Weakness of the perceptions from modern urban spaces commonly discusses through the concept of the “sense of place”. Here, it is not momentous either sense of the place makes identity or vice versa; what is important for us is the total relation between physical, social and historical objects of the place from both physical and mental aspects. Moreover, as urban spaces have social and cultural public territories between mass of buildings, they need to be more understood, perceived and recognized. Urban spaces should comprise the sense of place that lead to emerging a livable social and cultural spaces. They also have to be capable in providing users the sense of belonging and identity through the time. Relph (1976) described such phenomenon through the concept of “placelessness” through his studies on urban places identity. He indicated that our environment deals with the problem of placeless geography that appears by the missing of landscapes and places. He argued that we are losing our sense of the place by subjecting ourselves to the forces of placelessness. To his work, what appears in modern era is the grand scale and virtual absence of adaptation to local conditions of the present placelessness. So that placelessness may lead some losses of the place spirit. Accordingly, cultural features of the environment have to undeniably be considered through any urban transformation. This issue propounds in our study through assessing interactions between factors of the place identity and cultural features of the landscape to come up with a set of reliable design factors. To do so, we provide here a multi-structural design framework, so called matrix of cultural landscapes (CLs). The main concern of this technique is identifying cultural factors of the places and preserving them through transformations of the urban public spaces. Note that, any landscape (such as UNESCO sites, areas under protection constraints and historical spaces) may be considered as a cultural landscape in urban studies. Present work, particularly, attention to the cultural landscape of under development public urban spaces and the related influences to the quality of the place identity in modern era.

Manuscript is organized as follow. Section 2.1 and 2.2 respectively describe main representative characteristics of the place identity from the literature as well as principal features of the cultural landscapes attitude. In Section 2.3, we try to relate factors of the place identity and cultural landscapes in a matrix of CLs form for further urban investigation uses. We then qualitatively discuss code of each parcel of CLs matrix to clarify which type of information could be provided from the analysis of the matrix. Then, in Section 3, a test case in Mashhad city is subjected to a preliminary analysis of the matrix of CLs application.

2. Methodology

This section tries to list some descriptive (practical) factors of the place cultural identity. We firstly highlight main factors among the ones representing the place identity attitude; then we comprise these fundamental factors in a cultural landscapes framework.

2.1. Components of the place identity

An urban space comprising identity can become a part of symbolic realms of the city through the time and qualitatively improve memorability of the place for the citizens/visitors. An expression for the notion of urban identity may possibly be realized from a combined understanding from different urban elements of the place (e.g. street, square, building, public space, urban furniture and sculpture); hence, our concern here is going through the role of each single urban element in total description of the place identity.

Relph (1976) made a comprehensive study to the characteristics of the places identity. To him, identity is a fundamental concern in our everyday life referring to the persistent sameness and unity of the objects. Accordingly, identity allows something being different from the others. Relph argued that identity of a place comprises three inter-related components of (i) physical features and appearances, (ii) activities, and (iii) meaning and symbols. Physical components comprise any naturally existed (e.g. land, mountain and lake) or manmade (e.g. buildings and streets) environments each of which offers its own characteristics. Activities are composed of events, situations and functional patterns of the place while meanings factors shape through experiences and interactions of the users in a place.

Rapoport (1990) studied existed relations between urban environments and the reactions of their users. He argued that people react to the environments based on their perception from the meaning that the environment provides them. He explained that material objects may cause a preliminary feeling for the users. Such preparative understanding of the users will shape a background for their further precise image of the place. Then, an understanding from the “meanings” and “functions” of the place can provide the users some complementary information. He believes that signs and symbols play main roles to shape perceptual meaning of the places for their users. To him, our surrounding environment can be studied in terms of (i) signs which guide behaviors, (ii) affective signs which elicit feelings and (iii) symbols which influence thoughts.

Valera (1997) described the concept of urban identity in terms of “social urban identity”. He argued that social characteristics of a place take a special role to make a place as a symbolic urban space. To him, the “environmental image ability” and “social image ability” of a place can shape specific characteristics of the place and provide particular meanings for the users. Author categorized a suite of different influential factors of characterizing place identity from environmental and social image ability attitudes. He believes that different dimensions (e.g. traditional, temporal, behavioral, psychosocial, social and ideological) of an environment can influence the identity of the place. Such dimensions mix to shape the physical characteristics of the place and approve a total meaning for the place identity from the social point of view.

Carmona et al. (2010) propounded people need to experience sense of identity through their living environments; then, a successful public space should be capable to support this demand. He made a comprehensive literature review through available works in characterization of identity and sense of place in public urban spaces. Among them, he referred to the works by Punter (1991) and Montgomery (1998) which are focused on critical factors shaping sense of place in urban public spaces. Punter (1991) suggested such factors as (i) physical settings, (ii) activities and (iii) meanings. Montgomery (1998) made a similar study and categorized elements determining user’s cognition of a place as (i) forms, (ii) activities and (iii) images (see Fig. 1 for details). Carmona et al. (2010) indicated both aforesaid works are developed based on Relph (1976) study on places identity. From Fig. 1 we see that all aforesaid works agree to categorize visual values of urban spaces as physical elements. Such elements are mainly the first accessible and perceptible features of the place to be realized. Then, activities, meanings and images features concern some nonvisible perceptual factors behind the visual ones. They principally vary depending on our experiences in different urban spaces. Note that, activities represent functional abilities of a public space, hence, meanings and images belong to semantic values of that place.

More recently, Kaymaz (2013) remarked that identity is a dynamic phenomenon which comprises a wide range of
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