Identity of Urban Spaces: Assessment and Evaluation

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Abstract: As a major symbol of civilization, the city was built by man for his security and comfort. It is not only a settlement, but also an urban development which has been identified with the spirit that has been breathed into the community. Urban identity which is also known as collective identity, has gained meaning through the content of objective manifestation and the creation of flashbacks, citizens' memories and mental associations. That is what makes urban dwellers become citizens. Although the identity of the city is a result of civic culture, it still has an influence on the process of citizenship and can also be a reason for developing criteria related to the participation and assessment of its inhabitants. According to the view that identity is a set of traits and characteristics that distinguishes the dignity of a person and a society from other individuals and communities, a city becomes characterized and independent by adhering to these criteria. Despite the importance of identity as one of the richest qualitative aspects of urban life that gives meaning and fulfilment to the human quiddity, this complicated and expanded concept has still not been seriously considered, especially in relation to urban spaces. In fact, identity in architecture and urban spaces has recently diminished, since the main focus lies on building spaces for optimized profit and not for high quality living areas. In this research paper, parameters affecting urban identity are evaluated, and strategies and guidelines to promote these parameters are finally presented.

Key words: Identity, urban spaces, quality of life, urban development strategies.

1. Introduction

"The city is the point of maximum concentration for the power and culture of a community. It is the place where the diffused rays of many separate beams of life fall into focus, with gains in both social effectiveness and significance. (…) in the city the goods of civilization are multiplied and manifold; here is where human experience is transformed into viable signs, symbols, patterns of conduct, system of order" [1]. In the past, cities and urban spaces had been independent and had a singular identity and character, while in today's cities, the image anchored in the public mind is one of high-rise buildings, streets, parks, departments, etc. and as a result of this image, people's associations with places gradually began to fade. The city is a place in which citizens interact and where people have a sense of citizenship for the city they are living in. In other words, what defines a city is not parks or large buildings, but its inhabitants with all their customs, unique features, urban identity and sense of citizenship.

The concept of urban identity and its components can be described as time, place, ethnicity, beliefs, traditions, language and culture. Identity is rooted in human social life and includes the dimension of time. Within this concept, a sense of belonging to a certain place develops, resulting in a spatial dimension. Despite the complexity and dilemma of defining the concept of identity, any survey relating to identity should clearly define its expression and definition. For this purpose it is important to understand the definitions and concepts of identity, which people mean when they use the concept of identity and to evaluate the parameters that affect urban identity, and finally, to present approaches and recommendations to promote these parameters. The socio-cultural identity and collective memories of urban public spaces will be analysed to underline the importance of the continuity of urban public spaces and their sequential appearances. The importance of the appearance of physical spaces and the perception of skylines and façades and local activities are significant

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elements of urban public spaces. Other important elements for local activities are the materials used in urban areas, landmarks, smells and colours, as well as coexistence within the landscape and the quality of the sequential appearance of the city.

2. The Meaning of Identity

"Identity has been used as a term in English literature since the late sixteenth century, and in European literature other forms of it have been taken from the Latin word *identitas*. *Identitas* is made up of two parts: the first part is *idem*, which means the same, and the second part is *entitas* which means existence" [2]. The Webster dictionary defines identity as a sameness of essential or generic characters in different instances, sameness in all that constitutes the objective reality of a thing [2, 3]. In the OED dictionary, identity is defined as "the sameness of a person or thing at all times or in all circumstances; the condition or fact that a person or thing is itself and not something else; individuality, personality" [4]. Here, identity is defined as a sense of belonging to sets of cultural, historical, physical and spiritual elements that have already been created.

Urban identity concerns the meaning and significance of places for their inhabitants and users. Methodologies for understanding place identity primarily rely on qualitative techniques, such as interviews, participant observation, discourse analysis and the mapping of a range of physical elements. Some urban planners, urban designers and landscape architects use forms of deliberative planning, characters and participatory design with local communities as a way to work with place identity for transforming existing places as well as creating new ones. This approach to the planning and design process is referred to as place making. Urban identity relates to urban character, neighborhood character or local character. Over the last 25 years, urban identity has become a significant issue in urban planning and design. Related to the worldwide movement to protect urban spaces with heritage significance, concerns have arisen about the loss of

individuality and distinctiveness between different urban spaces as an effect of cultural globalization. By creating and bonding with public memorabilia, identity builds a sense of belonging in citizens and helps these urbanites to actually become citizens, which means more than to just live in the city. Notwithstanding that urban identity results from civic culture, it also affects the process of citizenship and can lead to the formulation of criteria that are relevant to the inhabitants' participation and judgement. Urban identity becomes significant once it has objectively crystallized in the form of the city. Urban identity develops due to the direct experiment with the physical environment and the reflection of social and cultural aspects of place. Urban identity also refers to recognizable features of the place, a feeling of an individual or a group, which is motivated in its relations to a place. This identity is part of the substructure of the human identity and general recognition of a person in the physical world. Notwithstanding the recognition of identity of the city should be based on the components of the character of the space, among them the natural components, such as mountains, rivers, hills and plains, i.e. the physical structure, the synthetic components such as buildings, roads, squares, quarters and city blocks, i.e. the visual identity and the human components such as culture, language, religion and conventions, i.e. the cognitive identity.

3. Identity of Physical-Spatial Structure

Since thoughts, beliefs, activities, and cultural levels of society have affected the formation of urban texture, this phenomenon and physical-spatial structure of cities is one of the most important aspects of urban identity. Due to the fact that the urban texture provides the ability to recognize urban identity in a visual form, it is more important than other aspects of identity. The most important aspects briefly addressed by physical identity are the formation of the city, the history of the settlement and its genesis as well as its transformation over time, features and physical structure of the city

(size, density and spatial distribution of urban phenomena), ancient and historic areas, accessibility features of urban and suburban communication, elements and performance features of urban texture, architectural and construction views of the city, as well as trends and dynamic features of the city. Visual identity includes the aesthetic values of the city and its quality of space as well as the possibility of understanding perception and orientation. If a person can describe a city and the pattern of that city well after entering it and visiting its different parts, it will remain in his mind. This is a reflection of the visual identity of the city.

According to Moore [5], "the cognitive identity is the doctrine that in knowing the rational soul is identical with the object that is known. Although some of Plato's successors adhere to this doctrine, conventional wisdom suggests that Plato does not. Lately, however, Lloyd Gerson (2003; 2006; 2009) has suggested a Platonic argument that leads to the cognitive identity of the rational soul with the object of knowledge." Cognitive identity is a species of what Gerson calls material identity. Cognitive identity shows the quality and quantity of the awareness of urban spaces, urban symbols, and historical-cultural values. Since identity elements carry different meanings during the day and night, they should have the same readability and clarity as well as maintain the identity of a city both by day and by night. "The phenomenon of the city reveals the extremely successful human survival strategy of using increasing population density to our advantage. Spatial proximity makes it possible for mutual synergies to be put to good use in a number of different ways, improving remarkably the lives of individuals as well as adding to the success of the community as a whole. The aim is to be able to take advantage of the strengths of others to realize one's own interests, while also compensating for individual weakness through the help of others. This not only greatly increases productivity, but also allows for an enhancement in performance through an efficient division of labor. However, the benefits of living together at a higher density are not restricted to advantages in a functional sense. The city also becomes a significant form in and of itself, which manifests itself to the outer world through the success of the synergies within it. For its inhabitants it becomes an identity, an object of self-identification within the social collective." [6].

"At the beginning of the design process, the image is usually incomplete. So we try repeatedly to re-articulate and clarify our theme, to add the missing parts to our imagined picture. Or, to put it another way: we design. The concrete, sensuous quality of our inner image helps us here. It helps us not to get lost in arid, abstract theoretical assumption; it helps us not to fall in love with the graphic quality of our drawing and to confuse it with real architectural quality. Producing inner image is a natural process common to everyone. It is part of thinking. Associative, wild, free, ordered and systematic thinking in image, in architectural, spatial, colorful and sensuous pictures-this is my favorite definition of design." [7].

4. Identity Aspects of Urban Spaces

The socio-cultural identity is undoubtedly the most important and significant source of identity. In this regard, the individual finds identity by relying on various components and cultural elements. In other words, culture may not only cause differences, but also integration and coherence in urban spaces. The urban environment has physical and human elements, i.e. so-called places of collective memories. Without human environment, there is neither society nor community. Individuals have different social expectations of different physical environments. Maintaining and strengthening memory and reminiscence factors is a tool that links inhabitants to their neighbourhood and that deepens their sense of belonging and mental associations. Forums and places for gatherings and collective activities are kinds of memorable factors that should be maintained and strengthened.

The urban morphology describing the elements of identity in urban public spaces with continuity and uniformity characteristics are creating interfaces between different groups and generations. Main communication spaces in the city, such as passages and squares, are created by linking together numerous elements of urban texture with strong and dynamic attributes. Plazas and squares are understood as fixed and strong spaces and the passages linking the plazas and the squares together are known as dynamic spaces. Existing squares and public arenas in the city create further communication, coherence and continuity in the place. This is an important factor for strengthening urban spaces and in some way, continuity within urban spaces has a great impact in highlighting and affirming the identity of these areas. When moving through the urban area, the observer will encounter a series of indoor and outdoor spaces as well as a series of urban spaces and will communicate with them. Quality of sequences and heterogeneous spaces includes all qualities mentioned in the definition of the quality of the space, of effective behavior, and the level of compatibility between components. Rhythm and tempo means the repetition of each element in terms of form, shape and color according to a certain discipline. Rhythm alone does not create discipline or order, but rather strengthens the existing order. Sudden exposure to the elements in a monotonous context causes the en masse or straight off feeling, and the subset of emphasis describes quality that occurs as a result of the preeminence of spatial elements, because of its features and characteristics in an urban landscape.

In recent decades, a problem has arisen in cities, in terms of the readability and appearance of physical spaces, yet urban texture in historic areas is still strong in terms of readability. Cognitive schemas and mental maps, places that are important and have universal aspects with regard to physical and cultural appearance are also effective in improving and enhancing urban identity. The separation of pedestrian walkways and traffic lanes in combination with natural elements enhances the readability of the urban areas. The consequential embedding of urban landmarks is also effective in improving the readability of urban environment. Roads and urban nodes are also among the readability factors. For example, a change of paving will improve, strengthen and personify it. The human scale is always the origin of the size of the built environment and facilitates its readability.

Visible elements of the built environment also play an important role in improving the wealth of sensitive impressions. Skylines and surrounding façades add a special and certain effect to buildings in the urban texture. This means that façades of various shapes, forms and rhythms will vary the perception of space. Urban landmarks are referencing elements of which most of the people in the city are aware. The existence of numerous landmarks strengthens the identity and readability of urban space. Landmarks can be divided into two categories: natural and built elements. Among the natural elements, water moving within the area will add liveliness and freshness to the environment and, as a vital element, will also enhance green spaces in surrounding areas. A sequence of landmarks in the urban neighborhood and their continuity will increase the readability of the urban neighborhood and will improve the neighborhood's identity in comparison with other neighborhoods. Some of these landmarks are often used for addressing and facilitating citizens' orientation, thus improving the readability of the urban space. Due to their form, the contrast with their surroundings, ancientness, and distant visibility, landmarks create memories in the observer's mind. The coexistence of the city and natural landscape elements alongside the human living environment is essential and necessary. By using natural resources and emphasizing the topography of the area, quality of life and wellbeing can be provided for the citizens as well as creating desirable neighbourhoods. The combination and integration of local activities can be considered as an important factor in shaping urban space as well as in strengthening, enlivening and vitalizing it. Some urban

neighborhoods are vibrant with vitality and bear a high potential due to attractive local activities and their multisensory perception.

Dominant materials in urban space and use of various building materials in urban areas are among the factors that cause diversity in space. Materials define local identities. Not all materials weather well under the same conditions. Materials should be chosen for their durability and robustness. All materials should be carefully specified and detailed to add to the quality and richness of the urban scene both today and in the future, when they are weathered. Materials available on a sustainable basis in the region reduce the ecological footprint. In old cities, the natural colors of the local materials of which buildings were made gave a uniform and harmonious image to the city, and were adapted to the customs, climate and culture of the people. The color of each city was considered as one aspect of its identity. In ancient cities, the smell of a place was also important for its identity. The presence of cafés creates a pleasant aroma in urban spaces, and the citizens in this area are aware of that typical smell. This enhances the readability and identity of urban space.

Zumthor [7] focuses on the subject of material and the meaning of smells and attributes specifically conceived for one building integrated in the urban space when he wrote in *Thinking Architecture*: "The sense that I try to instill into materials is beyond all rules of composition, and their tangibility, smell and acoustic qualities are merely elements of the language that we are obliged to use. Sense emerges when I succeed in bringing out the specific meanings of certain materials in my buildings, meanings that can only be perceived in just this way in this one building. If we work towards this goal, we must constantly ask ourselves what the use of a particular material could mean in a specific architectural context. Good answers to these questions can throw new light onto both the way in which the material is generally used and its own inherent sensuous qualities. If we succeed in this, materials in architecture can be made to shine and vibrate." [7].

5. Conclusions

Due to the multifaceted nature of the aspect of urban identity, it is necessary and essential to obtain a systematic and holistic approach. In this way, urban elements will be characterized and their position will be recognized in the city and society as well as their relation with citizens in urban phenomena. "After reviewing, summarizing, eliminating and merging the criteria, the standards for identified urban spaces are legibility and the capability of recognition, security, desirability, memorability, and a sense of belonging and affiliation. (…) Therefore the identity of an environment is generally defined as a relationship which links a person to a living environment or the environment which he is associated with." [2]. In order to improve the quality of urban spaces and identity of neighborhoods, it is vital to maintain and strengthen the function of the archetypical memory and image of citizens and their collaborative activities as well as to implement cooperative planning strategies. Respecting the regional language and culture, i.e. cultural identity, and creating attractive activities for mixed usage scenarios will entail organizing and reforming leisure activities for sustainable tourism opportunities. The resulting variety of functions that are attractive for different ages and social groups provides a spatial heterogeneity in urban quarters. The complementarity of strengthening these various scenarios embodies the ensemble as setting and design, preventing the creation of new buildings with disparate materials in the neighborhood, especially around valuable buildings. Having presented parameters, influences and main factors of urban identity, we should bear in mind that the identity of urban spaces always refers to tangible or intangible representations or images, as a holistic impression of reality. To conclude with Peter Zumthor's statement in *Thinking Architecture*, he points out that, "Thinking in images when designing is always directed towards the whole. By its very nature, the image is always the whole of the imagined reality: wall and floor, ceiling and materials, the moods of light

and color of a room, for example. And we also see all the details of the transitions from the floor to the wall and from the wall to the window, as if we were watching a film." [7]. By planning urban strategic processes a project is integrating in the big picture, interacting and exchanging its intervention with the existing urban texture. It thereby creates identity and identification of the citizens with the development. Without integration any urban intervention lacks identity and will not become accepted, attractive and liveable as part of the holistic image.

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