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Construction of Local and Regional Identity

Why the Concern?

Throughout history many attempts have been made to create places which would fulfil various societal requirements and at the same time be aesthetically pleasing to their everyday users and visitors. These places were constructed by either individual single minded decisions of the time or, as it was the case with most unplanned settlements, by incremental and gradual transformation processes where new urban areas were added to already existing urban nuclei. Quite often, it was a combination of both processes.

Many towns acquired their unique characteristics through a variety of factors: natural topographic and landscape features; the availability of building materials; construction techniques; mode of economic production; socio-political factors; and above all design approaches of the period. These unique qualities of settlements which are displayed in their physical form patterns and spatial organisation, together with the ways in which they relate to their natural landscape features, we call local identity. In urban design theory this quality is also referred to as *genius loci* or "sense of place".

Genius loci is an ancient Roman concept based upon the belief that "every independent being has its genius, its guardian spirit. This spirit gives life to people and places, accompanies them from birth to death, and determines their character or essence" (Norberg-Schulz, 1980, p.18). Because of an infinite number of ways in which individual components interrelate to each other we have acquired a great wealth of unique places with strong *local identities* to which many pilgrimages are made every year. Prague, Venice, Perugia, Oxford and Sienna are only a few with such unique and distinctive qualities.

However, besides possessing their unique, individual characteristics, groups of towns can also display certain common characteristics which are typical of their region or subregion. In urban design theory we refer to this quality as *regional identity*. Somerset towns, Cotswold villages, Umbrian hilltop towns, American prairie houses all exhibit strong regional identities.

Since 1945 there have been many changes in the way that settlements and buildings have been produced. Instead of a piecemeal largely localised building traditions, new types of built form production came into operation. Modern urban landscapes are being created at an enormous speed, replacing in the process many traditionally built buildings and local urban areas (Relph, 1987). Our contemporary modern cityscapes started to be dominated by high-rise office buildings, large scale mass housing schemes, shopping malls and other types of large retail outlets.

In order to avoid living in these changing cities many people sought retreat in picturesque villages. Their plight into the suburbs and the countryside was accompanied by many speculatively built new housing developments. These developments were packaged in such a way to be attractive and affordable to many middle income families. A whole range of neo-vernacular imagery was created and neatly marketed across many regions. In the process of creating "new village" schemes many historic areas became irrevocably altered as these new schemes were equally ignorant of the local building traditions and the inherited qualities of individual regions.

To many people's deep regret almost everywhere seems to be getting more and more like everywhere else. Some critics attribute these radical changes to the "corporatization" of cities (Relph, 1987), some to the post-war planning and design philosophies (Jacobs, 1961, Ravetz, 1986, The Prince of Wales, 1989) whilst others to the financial institutions that favour particular built form patterns as saleable commodities.

Some theorists relate these changes to the alienation that many people feel in the anonymous "anywhere" environments, and they talk about an "urban identity crisis" (Nicolin, 1989). Some go even further in claiming that "place and man's identity are dependent, that it is a common ground for man to understand and belong to, and to associate features in the place with his own identity; that the identity of a person is closely related to the identity of where he is from. (Norberg-Schulz, 1980). The more we are becoming part of a larger universal system, the more we want to portray our own individualism and personal or group aspirations. At the very individual level these feelings are usually expressed through the personalisation of people's properties.

But the reaction against this universal anonymity is not expressed at the personal and individual level only. Similar feelings are also being exerted at larger geographical scales. In the constant competition for increasingly footloose capital investment, cities and whole regions are beginning to recognise the value of an identifiable regional character in attracting key business personnel, and with them new firms and employment opportunities. Numerous urban design guides and briefs are regularly produced in England and overseas. They clearly illustrate the concern of many local authorities and their local constituents, to support and achieve new developments which would reflect local and regional character of both the landscape and built form features of their areas.

This search for local and regional identity is equally evident in many decolonized countries in Asia and Africa. Here the effects of modernisation can be seen in dramatic relief against traditional cultures. Decisions about "what does and does not belong in a region take on political and emotional dimensions in the struggle for cultural survival". (Abel, 1986).

Since about 1970, there has been an increasing and widespread interest in ways of reversing this process, and in the roles which planning, architecture and urban design might play in bringing this about. To many planners, architects and urban designers, it appears as a new and unfamiliar problem; but it is really an old one and it has been debated over many years from both the theoretical and practical perspectives.

It is the relationship between theory and practice that we should try to benefit from as practice without theory leads to mindless cribbing out of context, whilst theory without

practice is only of academic interest. The need to reconcile the two sides is of great importance if we are to avoid the production of competent mediocrity or pastiche architecture and urban design.

Local and Regional Identity in Theory and Practice

In urban design theory today local identity is concerned with achieving local and regional character, in new designs, to emphasise the unique character of places expressed through both their physical design and their spatial organisation. It aims to produce urban design which is both locale specific and part of world culture. Urban designers and architects who employ this concept in their designs use a variety of urban design methods and architectural vocabulary. Therefore, the local and regional identity approach to designing local urban areas and buildings is not associated with any particular style or design philosophy.

There have been many attempts throughout history to both define the concept of local and regional identity and to develop practical approaches for achieving this quality. The main purpose here is not to give a detailed account of these theoretical and practical endeavours but to focus on key ideas and methods that might be of relevance to us today.

In Sienna, efforts were made in 1292 to co-ordinate various design problems of Campo del Santo aiming to 'unify' various individual built form components into an identifiable 'whole'. Similar attempts were made during the Renaissance period in Italy and many other regions to promote and construct towns which would be both modern and reflect local and regional character. Many architects, painters and sculptors were employed to assist various townsmen in creating places unique and distinct from their neighbouring provinces.

The city of Dubrovnik illustrates well this endeavour by which travelling merchants were required to provide a particular kind of local stone as part of their entry into the local market trade. Individual local builders and craftsmen also had to follow a specially defined local building code to construct a city which would be unified throughout, from the overall plan layout concept (the grid), down to fine detailing of building typologies. A characteristic unique morphology was created which still reflects the communal aesthetic aspirations of the time.

Similar examples can be found in many 18c English, picturesque villages which were constructed to reflect the 'idyllic' aspirations of the period as a contrast to many 'boring' 17c built form patterns designed on Classical principles.

Greater and more co-ordinated efforts to both define local and regional character of towns and to use this knowledge in design practice can be found in the formative years of the modern movement from the 1890s onwards. The first ideas were initially explored by German geographers who systematically studied and classified various German towns by distinguishing their geomorphic (evolutionary) components and their regional characteristics. Schluter (1899) for example introduced the concept of "urban landscape" (Stadtlandschaft) which was defined by the physical form (land, plots and buildings) and appearance of towns. Schluter also postulated the concept of "cultural landscape" (Kulturlandschaft) and drew attention to classification of settlement types (morphology), land use patterns and communication systems as key determinants of regional settlement characteristics.

The continuation of these ideas was further carried out during the 1920s and 1930s through the work of Hassinger (1912), Geisler (1918) and Leighly (1929), of which Hassinger's work on architectural classification of buildings was a significant contribution for conservation studies of Vienna.

These early ideas of distinguishing unique morphological components of towns and therefore understanding towns' unique characteristics, and identities, were a rich source of design ideas to Otto Wagner and Camillo Sitte. Both designers tested their initial ideas in Vienna at the turn of the 19c, to be later further developed in several Central and Eastern European cities.

Although somewhat disparate in their design approaches both designers attempted to use the existing morphological structure of the city of Vienna in developing their future proposals. By introducing a radial-concentric road system they teased out the existing mediaeval nuclei and provided a new spatial framework for the expansion of the city. Major public and monumental buildings were inserted in key locations to provide variety and to ensure legibility for the users.

Of particular relevance to practising urban designers today are Camillo Sitte's ideas beautifully summarised in his seminal work *City Planning According to Artistic Principles* (1899). In this book Sitte acknowledges the key value of historic townscapes and morphological components as powerful providers of sensory experience of cities. Sitte claims that by understanding the general physiognomy of a place, we can understand its past, and its history. And by understanding its history we understand its identity. Without a sense of history we may lose our own identity.

In his design approach Sitte uses a range of techniques to enrich sensory experience of cities. He juxtaposed shortcut views and winding mediaeval type streets to ensure continuously emerging visual experience at the pedestrian level of movement. These short vistas are then contrasted with long views of broad avenues, to promote a totally different visual experience for faster moving modes of transport.

At the turn of the 19c many cities throughout Europe had to deal with the problem of linkage of old and newly expanding urban areas and the ideas developed by Wagner and Sitte were adopted, though invariably modified, by many European urban designers. Two cities which bear influence of these early design ideas are the cities of Prague and Ljubljana.

During the 1920s and 1930s many theoretical studies were carried out in North America and in Europe to further define the conceptual understanding of local and regional identity. Some of these studies found a firm basis in the development of practical solutions, as in the design of the London Underground Railway system. In this project the *corporate identity* approach was employed to generate a coherent and commercially viable character for the disparate components of the system.

Further continuation of theoretical and practical propositions for achieving local and regional identity took place during the 1950s in England. These initiatives were largely associated with the townscape approach which emphasises the visual perception of the urban environment.

Very much embedded in the English picturesque landscape school of thought and the work of Cullen (1961) this method assumes that the visual perception of the urban environment, and consequent improvements of it, can be accomplished in an objective way. These improvements can be achieved through an understanding of the emotional effects created by the juxtaposition of its physical and visual elements. Architectural and urban design components of the physical form are seen as an art of ensemble.

Urban design themes that evolved from this approach found a firm application in the development of urban design guides and urban design briefs in England. The guides were largely used by local planning authorities (Essex Design Guide, 1973) to promote the design of new settlements in the spirit of the local and regional built form character.

Noake Bridge, Brentwood and South Woodham Ferres are typical examples of efforts made by Essex County Council to promote a particular regional character through new designs. Urban design principles ranging from landscape to large and small scale built form cues such as layouts, materials, characteristic grouping of dwellings and building detailing, were derived from the existing Essex settlements. Following the recommendations contained in the 'guide' was a pre-condition for obtaining planning or building permits. 'New Essex' identity is today widely appreciated by its many residents who see it as a positive departure from the earlier built 'anywhere' type speculative housing developments or shopping precincts.

Equally important has been the use of urban design briefs which contain urban design guidelines for specific sites. Some of the best examples of the British briefing practice designed specifically to promote a particular local character have been used in the designs of Broadgate Arena and Richmond Riverside developments in London. In these examples contextual reference is made to the existing morphological and typological patterns in order to create new places that would reflect the identity of that locality. Broadgate Arena, designed by Peter Foggo and Arup Associates "echoes great Georgian Squares, in this case the nearby Finsbury Circus" (Butina Watson, 1993, p.67) whilst Quinlan Terry's Riverside Development fits well into the overall Georgian morphological tissue of the area.

Some recent attempts have extended the practice of guidance and briefing into the sphere of local plans. The identification of 'design areas' as proposed by Hall (1996) or methods advocated by Evans (1996) make a significant contribution to the planning and design of local urban areas and small new settlements. Evans discusses a range of urban design qualities which are important in the achievement of local distinctiveness and sustainable settlements. He also proposes instruments and methods for achieving these qualities. Specific design guidelines, developed by Evans, are tested and incorporated into the Purbeck District Plan which will direct future planning and design of both the existing and new small settlements in Dorset.

Similar attempts to reinforce and achieve local identity of places are also being made in other developed and developing countries. Aldo Rossi's Centro Direzionale in Perugia, Jimmy Lim's houses in Malaysia or Boston's redevelopment strategy for its downtown artery are only a few examples that illustrate well the current directions being explored by designers and other professional and user groups. What seems important now is to develop conceptual frameworks for both articulating what local identity means in specific cultural contexts and to develop tools for the potential exchange of ideas and practices employed. Especially important in this debate and exchange of ideas are the views of the local users as they are the critical groups that decode messages put forward by designers and other producers of the built environment.

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Figure 1: Finchingfield village in Essex
Figures 2, 3: Noake Bridge in Essex
Figures 4, 5: South Woodham Ferres in Essex
Figure 6: A typical 1960s speculative development in Essex

For sources and literature see page 8

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Urban Policies and Citizenship

Some Mechanisms for the Production of Urban Space in the City of Sao Paulo

1. Introduction

Modern Brazil, was the result of a commercial venture. The territory of what is today the Federative Republic of Brazil, was "discovered" in the year 1500 by the Portuguese captain Pedro Alvares Cabral, who was, of course, searching for a passage to India and its immense riches of spices, precious stones and metals. Victim of a virulent exploitative colonial system, the country saw its original inhabitants eliminated by massacre and disease, and large populations transplanted from Africa to the new plantations of sugar cane and later to the gold mines. As many Portuguese sought prosperity in Brazilian lands, it became evident to the metropolis that the colony was no more than an easy opportunity for profit, and thus did not allow the building of a domestic economy. This is the historical frame in which the Brazilian identity was formed.

Slovenia on the other hand emerged as a modern nation with an established cultural identity, which we could largely identify by certain aspects of common heritage, such as language and religion.