IN PLACE

A STUDY OF BUILDING & IDENTITY
IN PLACE
A STUDY OF BUILDING & IDENTITY

HARRIET WENNBERG
DEFINING ‘PLACE IDENTITY’

THE IMPACT OF GLOBALISATION

LOCAL VALUE

REFLECTING PLACE IDENTITY

CASE STUDIES

ANALYSIS & CONCLUSIONS

Sponsored by:

ADAM ARCHITECTURE

BIBLIOGRAPHY Pg. 35
‘Place’ is a phenomenon always present in human life: “to be is to be in place” (Casey, 1993). Having emerged at the end of the 20th century, the term ‘place identity’ focuses on the significance of place, people, and meaning. Place identity is acknowledged as an important topic in the fields of geography, environmental psychology, urban and ecological sociology, urban design, and architecture.

This study will examine developments in the expression of place identity in architecture, giving a brief multidisciplinary overview of the concept of place identity, establishing the meaning of place identity in a rapidly globalising world, and providing examples of the diverse ways in which the locality and specificity of place are represented in contemporary architecture.

Research on place has proliferated since the 1970s, when phenomenological geographers Yi-Fu Tuan, Edward Relph, and Anne Buttimer realised “the need to explore the topic in terms of its everyday lived dimensions” (Seamon, 2012). Beyond the current broad trans-disciplinary agreement that place identity is an important concept, its precise definition varies from one field of study to another.

While from an architectural perspective a particular identity is seen as arising from and belonging to a particular place, environmental psychology considers place identity to be a feature of a person rather than
of a place. Harold Proshansky, for example, argues that place identity derives from ‘self theory’ as a sub-structure of an individual’s self-identity, which consists broadly of cognitions about the physical world representing “memories, ideas, feelings, attitudes, values, preferences, meanings, and conceptions of behaviours and experience” (Proshansky et al., 1983). To environmental psychologists, individuals define who and what they are in terms of highly subjective “affective ties” to home, neighbourhood, and community. Through attachment to places, individuals derive a sense of belonging and purpose that gives meaning to their lives (ibid.). It has also been hypothesised that an individual’s identification with place can be causally linked to their sense of coherence and their health (Hull, 1994).

In architecture and urban design, place identity is distinct from self-identity, and can be more literally defined. A place can embody a clear identity to be perceived collectively by groups of inhabitants and users by encompassing “a set of features that guarantee the place’s distinctiveness and continuity in time. The concept of ‘genius loci’, used to describe the impalpable but generally agreed upon unique character of a place, reflects this meaning of ‘place identity’” (Lewicka, 2008). Place exerts its influence through “physical features and symbolic meanings, with the former often being a cue to the latter” (Stedman, 2003). Stokols (1981) defines these place-based meanings as “the nonmaterial properties of the physical milieu – the socio-cultural ‘residue’ (or residual meaning) that becomes attached to places as a result of their continuous association with group activities”.

“[P]lace is space endowed with meaning” (Lewicka, 2008), while identity involves two things: sameness, or continuity; and distinctiveness, or uniqueness (Jacobson-Widding, 1983). Place identity in the built environment arises from both continuity and “distinctive characteristics” (Gospodini, 2002), and concerns the meaning and significance of places for their inhabitants and users. Place identity is simultaneously straightforward and complex: place is afforded a unique identity through a “persistent sameness and unity which allows [it] to be differentiated from others” (Relph, 1976); yet the process of how a place has achieved and retains its sameness and unity, and how a place’s distinctiveness is perceived and interpreted by its inhabitants and users is many-layered and evolving.

The process of identity formation, it is argued,
“can never start from scratch; it always builds upon a pre-existing set of symbolic materials which form the bedrock of identity” (Thompson, 1996). Numerous studies have been conducted to establish what forms the bedrock of identity for specific communities. Given place identity’s in-built need for distinctiveness, its precise nature varies from one place to another. In an architectural sense, however, it is possible to define the fundamental, material components of place identity, which all observers of place can recognise: shape, or form; texture; material; colour; and detail.

The complex ties that bind people to place arise through interaction with the distinct physical and visual elements of place, which combine to give a place its individual identity. This identity is not static; it can shift and evolve depending on the social, political, and economic climate, which can in turn affect how a place’s inhabitants and users engage with it. Architecture and urban design are stable environmental symbols because they are harder and slower to change, which means that significant shifts and evolution in place identity can occur relatively slowly over years or generations. This allows for a balance between change and the continuity of the particular set of features that guarantee the place’s distinctiveness.

In the architectural sense, place identity is the sum of specific material components and features, which provoke non-material symbolic meanings for collective groups of inhabitants and users. The existence and essential role of these material components and features mean that the generally agreed upon distinct identity of a place can be literally perceived and defined.
As we all come from and reside in a place, we are all to some extent able to recognise when a place has become unrecognisable as itself. This can occur when the continuity in time of the distinct material components of place identity – shape, texture, material, colour, and detail – is overtaken or overwhelmed by broad societal change. Globalisation is by nature a homogenising force in economics, politics, culture, and consequently in architecture, and has presented a challenge to the perceivable and definable uniqueness of place.

The current age allows unprecedented levels of movement of people, capital, ideas, and styles. Despite globalisation’s many obvious and significant benefits, it also threatens to replace local distinctness with global sameness. However, many sociologists, scholars, and historians have observed that “globalisation, rather than homogenising society, has been an agent of fragmentation” (Adam, 2012). It would appear that the processes of globalisation and localisation are “inextricably bound together”: the doubts and anxieties that the inherent complexities of globalisation engender precipitate “the desire to remain in a bounded locality or return to some notion of ‘home’” (Featherstone, 1995). The connection between globalisation and localisation stems in part from the increased collective awareness of place identity and bonds to place that occurs when “sense of place is threatened” (Proshansky et al., 1983). As anthropologist Marc Augé (1995) has noted, “[a]t the very same moment when it becomes possible to think in terms of the unity of terrestrial space, and the big multinational networks grow strong, the clamour of particularisms rises”. Communities have to drop “their heaviest cultural anchors” during periods of intensive social change “in order to resist the currents of transformation” (Cohen, 1985).
Creating place identity has emerged as a solution to the destabilising effects of modern, globalised societies. This can be observed in contemporary architecture that seeks to connect people with their environment and “increase the sense of attachment and belonging in architectural spaces” (Noormohammadi, 2012). Environmental psychologists have pointed out the importance of belonging to or in a certain place, and there is widespread agreement that the primary function of place is to “engender a sense of belonging and attachment” (Proshansky et al., 1983). The results of studies have promoted the encouragement of development practices that promote and exploit place identity “and hence encourage (or at least do not discourage) people’s psychological investment in their local, physical communities” (Hull, 1994). These theories for counteracting alienation and homogeneity in a globalised world have also found support in UNESCO’s 2001 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, which states that “cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biological diversity”.

The International Style, or Modernism, became the dominant architectural style after World War II. Modernism’s principles applied the same or similar physical components of shape and material to buildings, regardless of the places in which they were built. In the late 1970s, Postmodernism emerged and made fashionable “the inclusion of historical elements in the name of local identity” (Adam, 2012). A strand of Modernism began to recognise the importance of place identity and the representation of the locality and specificity of place in the early 1980s. In 1981, architectural historians Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre published an essay entitled ‘The Grid and the Pathway’, which called this localising tendency ‘Critical Regionalism’. Following texts
by architect, critic, and historian Kenneth Frampton that have expanded the theory supporting *Critical Regionalism*, it has become increasingly the norm for architects to describe their work as locally responsive. One revealing example is the language employed on the websites of prominent modernist architects – many of whom have become internationally renowned for designing icons with a deliberate lack of ties to any particular place – which describes projects as “inspired by”, “responding to”, “evocative of”, “in sympathy with”, and “in harmony with” existing built fabric and place identity.

There is currently widespread agreement, in architectural discourse and in other disciplines, concerning the importance of reflecting locality and contributing to place identity. This agreement is at a broad level. In practice, a spectrum of ways exists in which local and regional features are referenced and represented in architecture, ranging from the very literal to the highly allegorised, abstracted, and metaphorical.

According to Kenneth Frampton (1985), *Critical Regionalism* “is regional to the degree that it invariably stresses certain site-specific factors, ranging from the topography, considered as a three-dimensional matrix
into which the structure is fitted, to the varying play of local light across the structure”. *Critical Regionalism* tends towards the “paradoxical creation of a regionally based ‘world culture’” and is “opposed to the sentimental simulation of the local vernacular”, but will on occasion “insert reinterpreted vernacular elements as disjunctive episodes within the whole” (ibid.). Tzonis and Lefaivre (2003) outline *Critical Regionalism*’s interest “in specific elements from the region, […] the place-defining elements, [which it] incorporates ‘strangely’, rather than familiarly; it makes them appear strange, distant, difficult, even disturbing”.

We can identify two current and widely-employed techniques for giving architecture “an identity that relates a building to its locality”: *site-specific design*, which is embodied in *Critical Regionalism*’s use of local idiosyncrasies of place to define design; and *symbolic identity*, or the architect’s “personal discovery of local symbolism” (Adam, 2012). However, despite the intentions of any architect to create works that achieve a sense of place, no method exists to guarantee that a building will be considered to reflect locality and contribute to the identity of the place in which it has been built. There is agreement that making a building locally responsive is important; there is no agreement on how to measure whether a design’s local responsiveness has been meaningfully and effectively achieved.
CASE STUDIES
CASE STUDY

‘THE ROOMS’

ST JOHN’S, NEWFOUNDLAND, CANADA, 2004

PHB Group — St. John’s, Canada [no longer practising]

The Rooms in St John’s, Newfoundland, is a cultural facility housing an art gallery, the provincial archives, and the provincial museum for Newfoundland and Labrador. The building’s name and its architecture reference the simple gable-roofed sheds, or ‘fishing rooms’, which were used historically by Newfoundlanders in outport communities to process their catch.

Fishing rooms were a common sight in these outport communities prior to the steep decline in fishing that followed the 1992 moratorium on catching northern cod. Many former residents of outports now reside in St John’s and The Rooms, visible from almost any point in the city, is designed as a larger-than-life reminder of their former way of life.

“It’s as unique as we are.”
A distinct place identity has been transposed into a new environment, enlarged, and adapted to house archives, artefacts, and art.

As The Rooms now competes with the Basilica of St John the Baptist for dominance of the St John’s skyline, a saying has developed amongst local residents: “there’s the basilica; and there’s the box it came in” (Brodkorb, 2014).

CASE STUDY

SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT

EDINBURGH, UNITED KINGDOM, 2004

Enric Miralles and Benedetta Tagliabue (EMBT) — Barcelona, Spain

Scotland’s Parliament at Holyrood in Edinburgh was built to house the devolved Scottish Parliament following the 1997 referendum. The complex incorporates the debating chamber building, four tower buildings containing committee rooms, briefing rooms, and staff offices, the Members of Scottish Parliament (MSP) building, the Cannongate buildings, a media building, and a large foyer. The Arcspace website describes the project as having drawn inspiration “from the surrounding landscape, flower paintings by Charles Rennie Mackintosh, and upturned boats on the seashore”.

On their practice’s website, Miralles and Tagliabue express their hope that the Scottish Parliament fosters “a series of identifications between the building and the land, land and citizens, citizens and building”. Some layers of meaning, however, proved too obscure to be identifiable.
The building’s facades have an irregular pattern of a repeated abstract shape, for which local residents supplied their own interpretation.

The shape was alternately referred to as anvil, hammer, and hairdryer, before it was made clear that the shape was “Miralles’ highly abstracted profile of Henry Raeburn’s 18th century painting, The Skating Minister” (Adam, 2012).

“The building design should be like the land, built out of the land and carved into the land.”
The Menara Mesiniaga Tower houses IBM’s headquarters in Subang Jaya, near Kuala Lumpur. It is the first ‘bioclimatic’ tower that provides regional identity by responding to regional climatic conditions. The singular appearance of the tower is the result of Ken Yeang’s ecologically and environmentally conscious design strategies, which optimise the use of the locality’s ambient energies. The tower is lauded on the Aga Khan Award for Architecture’s website as a singular, innovative landmark; yet it is also claimed that the tower is essentially of its place and expressive of its place, because of its regional bioclimatic adaptations.

“a building in [the] context of its place – reflecting cultural and climatic influences.”
CASE STUDY

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF QATAR

DOHA, QATAR, 2016 (EXPECTED)

Jean Nouvel (Ateliers Jean Nouvel) — Paris, France

Conceived as growing out of the ground, the design for the National Museum of Qatar in Doha uses sand-coloured concrete rings to form low-lying, interlocking pavilions, encircling a large courtyard. It is being built around the historic Fariq Al Salatah Palace, which since 1975 had been serving as a heritage museum.

The form of the enclosed courtyard symbolises a ‘caravanserai’: the traditional resting places that formed part of desert trade routes. According to E-Architect’s website, Jean Nouvel’s design “gives concrete expression to the identity of a nation in movement” and manifests the “crystallisation of Qatari identity”. Nouvel’s own likening of the design to a “bladelike petal of the desert rose” refers to a mineral formation of crystallised sand, which is found in the briny layer that lies beneath the desert’s surface.

“like the bladelike petals of a desert rose, growing out of the ground as if it was one with it.”
ANALYSIS & CONCLUSIONS

The preceding case studies are examples of Critical Regionalism that claim a connection to the places in which they have been built. These examples can all be sited on the spectrum of ways in which local and regional features are referenced and represented in architecture, with a range of symbols, allegories, metaphors, and references to built and unbuilt elements of local place identity being deployed to contend that these buildings are natural expressions of their contexts.

It could be argued that some elements of local identity do not work when expressed architecturally, perhaps particularly those that have been subjectively selected by the architect, or that are highly abstracted, symbolic, or immaterial. A dividing line must exist, on one side of which references to locality are understood and appreciated by the local community, and on the other side of which the chosen symbolism has become so abstracted as to cease to bear any relevance for the local community.

The purpose of this study is not to come to definite conclusions regarding contemporary architecture’s relative success or lack of success at expressing place identity. The purpose is rather to point to the need for further research into this subject, to determine whether an architect’s written or verbal claims to a building’s being ‘in place’ are enough to make it so, and to develop a method through which examples of contemporary architecture claiming a local connection can be assessed against the literal definition of a place’s distinct identity. Success at representing something of such past, present, and future significance as place identity is surely best measured by the local community whose identity is being represented.
BOOKS


Articles


Stedman, R.C. ‘Is it really just a social construction? The contribution of the physical environment to a sense of place’. Society and Natural Resources 16 (2003).


Tuan, Y. ‘Rootedness versus sense of place’. Landscape 24 (1980).

Twigger-Ross, C.L. and D. Uzzell. ‘Place and identity processes’. In Journal of Environmental Psychology 16 (1996).

WEBSITES


INTERVIEWS

Brodkorb, M. Interviewed by the author 29 December 2014.
INTBAU IS AN INTERNATIONAL EDUCATIONAL CHARITY WHICH WORKS UNDER THE PATRONAGE OF HRH THE PRINCE OF WALES TO PROMOTE TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURE, URBANISM AND BUILDING ARTS. THE SECRETARIAT OF THE ORGANISATION IS BASED IN LONDON, UNITED KINGDOM. 22 NATIONAL CHAPTERS OF INTBAU ARE ESTABLISHED AS INDEPENDENT, AFFILIATED CHARITIES IN COUNTRIES AROUND THE WORLD.

INTBAU IS A WORLD WIDE ORGANISATION DEDICATED TO THE SUPPORT OF TRADITIONAL BUILDING, THE MAINTENANCE OF LOCAL CHARACTER AND THE CREATION OF BETTER PLACES TO LIVE. WE ARE CREATING AN ACTIVE NETWORK OF INDIVIDUALS AND INSTITUTIONS WHO DESIGN, MAKE, MAINTAIN, STUDY OR ENJOY TRADITIONAL BUILDING, ARCHITECTURE AND PLACES.
‘PLACE’ IS A PHENOMENON ALWAYS PRESENT IN HUMAN LIFE: “TO BE IS TO BE IN PLACE” (CASEY, 1993).