

BOOK REVIEW

Planning and Place in the City: Mapping Place Identity

Marichela Sepe

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In this book Marichela Sepe of the Italian National Research Council explores various theories and methods for capturing aspects of place identity in both theory and practice. A key part of the presentation is a series of case studies demonstrating the use of a complex-sensitive method of recording, investigating, presenting and displaying potential enhancement of features in the urban environment that contribute to the place identity of certain streets, blocks and wider areas within a range of urban settings. These case studies demonstrate the application of a framework approach known as "PlaceMaker", first proposed by the author in 2006.

A foreword by University of Nottingham Professor Emeritus Taner Oc identifies that this work adds to the journey commenced in 1960 by Kevin Lynch in his *Image of the City*. Oc observes that in urban design practice a questioning and inquisitive approach that is dynamic and evolving is emerging as evidenced by this volume.

The author argues that urban places change continuously, responding to the rhythms of life, economies, social fashions and trends. It is suggested that most recently urban spaces are being influenced to an increasing extent by the establishment of internet shopping and social media. These trends, Sepe claims, drive changes in usage and demand for urban spaces. Yet, as the author notes, these changes are often driven by the globalised forces of multi-national brands which is observed to result in a loss of place identity.

Sepe identifies place identity as "the set of cultural markers that define a city's uniqueness and make it instantly recognisable." The author continues to challenge that "a key task for planners and residents working together is to preserve that unique sense of place without making the city a parody of itself."

The book builds in its introductory sections on the studies of Kevin Lynch, Taner Oc and Bernard Lassus, identifying these authors as the inspiration of the complex-sensitive method. In deriving a meaning for the public realm that is so much more than a "space", the author empathises with Hague and Jenkins' definition that a space becomes a "place" when it is imbued with 'identity'. The author thoroughly explores the question of what that identity is, and how can it be captured, setting out excellent,

concise summaries of the main analytical and planning methods for place making. These include: its origins, and virtual, lateral, people-orientated, multi-scale, configurational and complex-sensitive approaches.

The book continues by detailing the eight-stage process that is the 'PlaceMaker' method. The outcome of this is a plan- and table-driven assessment of the physical manifestations of identity brought about by the combination of urban landscape features, sensations and experiences. These are captured through a variety of familiar techniques, including photographic, diagrammatic, questionnaire and observational data collection to produce a thorough and complex audit of an area.

Within the methodology the need to apply environmental psychological techniques to gain understanding of the relationship between social and emotional associations with place is recognised. These associations may vary considerably between residents (either permanent or temporary), visitors (either short or long term), and other users of an area such as business operators or their clientele. Sustainability place identity indices are applied to given relative weightings between all types of characteristics of an area, including emotional and social factors. Absolute indices can be used to compare different places, whilst relative weighting gained from a median index is used to characterize sustainability within a place. The key point is that the method is not necessarily prescriptive about survey techniques, but does indicate those that should be considered. Sustainability place index formulae were proposed by Sepe in an earlier paper (2006), in the development of the Place Maker software. The software requires the input of values for predetermined characteristics and enables a calculation of a numerical value to reflect relative sustainability, and, as Sepe defines it, "absolute" sustainability, allowing comparison between two different areas.

The remaining two-thirds of the book then presents seven comprehensive case studies focusing on: Preserving Place Identity (Trevi-Pantheon, Rome and South Broadway, Los Angeles); Reconstructing Place Identity (Kitan-cho, Kobe, and, Market Street, San Francisco); and Enhancing Place Identity (Oxford Street, London, Las Ramblas, Barcelona and Esplanadi area, Helsinki).

The author references Lynch's definition of place, and observes that the accelerating rate of change and transformation in many urban spaces – often towards what is perceived by most commentators as increasing homogeneity – has fostered the sense of the "anywhereness" now so widely reported. This issue is also a frequent complaint by residents of areas which have been transformed through the application of similar urban design techniques. This reviewer notes that this impact has often followed from the application of urban design theory and practice by landscape planners, designers and architects through their global practice, despite often including complex-sensitive survey and design techniques. Outcomes have tended to drive out local "quirkiness" in a desire to "gentrify" an area to make it more appealing to an increasingly global market in tourism, travel and destination experience.

There is no doubt that Sepe's motivations are to seek to capture the essence of what makes each place "special", and to preserve that sense of uniqueness. Indeed the book concludes by proposing twelve principles for sustainable place identity enhancement. However, it is important when critically analysing this volume to recognise that, as far as this reviewer can establish, the proposed designs for the areas in the case studies have been proposed and analysed only in theory. Such enhancements are not often enacted entirely as planned, or completed in a short time scale. It is therefore also unclear how the impacts of the proposed enhancements of place identity in each of the five case studies have been assessed. It appears that this assessment has only been done "in principle" through consultation with a limited audience, as opposed to post implementation monitoring, which would enable much

wider impact assessment to be carried out, encompassing social, economic, cultural and environmental aspects. Because of these reservations it is inevitably hard to reach a firm conclusion on the likely benefits to place identity of the PlaceMaker approach.

A further observation on this method is that it is intended to be used by “a practitioner, academic or student of urban design in conjunction with residents.” Similarly, within the UK there is an increasing trend towards more local, bottom up approaches to resident involvement, resulting in them gaining more control over such processes and moving away from “expert planner”-led changes. However, continued fiscal austerity also limits the likely scale and quality of future urban transformation schemes funded by the public sector. Hence it is more likely that future urban space transformations will be sponsored by and delivered for the private sector, which is dominated by globalised brands seeking to establish common identities across every high street. Therefore, it could be argued that there is likely to be continuing tension between the reasonable objectives set out by Sepe in this book, to preserve and enhance place identity, and the commercial pressures upon the implementation of change in urban areas.

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