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FACTORS INFLUENCING URBAN PLACEIDENTITY AND ITS ROLE IN ANCHORING THE DELINEATION OF PRECINTS

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Abstract

It is pertinent to form a mental organization of a neighbourhood and its perceived delineation to consciously build a place identity. The study argues that a good neighbourgood is made up of a complex combination of built infrastructure with perceptible level of legibility and order. It explores the various attributes that builds this collective construct at the neighbourhood level. Five discreet sites with varied built and natural characteristics are chosen for the study and the characteristics were studied and evaluated. The outcome of the study will identify the parameters which contributes to construct the place identity and aid resource allocation for development projects in creating unique neighbourhoods with identity.The possibility and means of creating an active and vibrant city life is deliberated and deduced through the study.

Keywords: Urban Form / Built Environment / Quality of Life / Urban Vitality /Place Identity.

Introduction

Identity of an individual depends upon a lot of attributes such as ethnicity, religion, language, gender, education and is getting increasingly ephemeral primarily due to the agile nature of the urban population. The place we dwell and the immediate neighbourhood has an increasing level of influence in shaping the character, behavior and the quality of life of an individual forming the premise of this study.Gaston Bachelard (1958) poetically quotes that the life of the mind is given form in the places and spaces in which people dwell and those places influence human memories, feelings and thoughts.

The physical environment and its characteristics contribute to the construction of a sense of place (Steadman, 2003). In this regards, the physical characteristics strengthen both place attachment and satisfaction. Sustaining the meanings and identity of the elements of the built form and its associated images is crucial since it significantly contribute to self-identity of the individual, collective identity of the community by creating a strong sense of place.

Space and Place

Space has often been described as the context for places. Architectural spaces are manifested in the relationships between building form, their enclosed interior and the interrelationships between the exterior and the interior. Creating a place depends on both the physicality of the place and the psychological mapping of the place which people use to navigate the place. Lynch (1960) has

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dealt with the notion of 'mental maps' in great depth while elucidating on places. This is a subjective factor and will differ from person to person and will change over time. Jane Jacobs (1961) wrote about the role of activities that happen in street and a public space that creates a strong meaning to the place. Places are the expressions of past actions, repeated experiences and hopes they will endure into the future. The essence of places largely depends on the human experiences that defined the particular place than the location or the function of the territory.

Legibility of Urban Form

For the human mind to perceive the urban form as an experience in the same way it is constructed in reality, the urban elements at different scale to be organized legibly. There should be a conscious effort to transform the non perceptible parameters such as accessibility, adequacy, diversity, adaptability and comfort to perceptible parameters through built interventions.

The predominant elements of the urban form such as the paths and nodes have to be consciously dealt to improve the perceptual performance. Of the above, the paths are the most significant since it is strongly influenced by the geographical character and limitation of the region. It strongly defines the flow of people and vehicles determining the associated experience and formed perception. The nodes are places of specific intense activity and has a considerable role in building the legibility and has to connect with one another and the path systems to add to the overall legibility of the place.

Overall Neighborhood form and Visual Shape

It is important that the users have a overall perceivable urban form and visual shape of the neighborhood to construct his identity of the precinct. Even more significant is to transfer these perceptual forms on the documents to real life urban experiences. The other performance characteristics such as the accessibility, adequacy, diversity, adaptability and comfort should also be incorporated as a integral part of the overall neighborhood. The broad models of the urban forms can be classified under Linear System, Linkage System, Radial System and a Grid System

Organization of the form

Legibility is achieved by organizing the urban canvas under one of the may possible methods.

Linear Form : The predominate organization characterized the places are aligned in reference to a linear form such as a path or a dominant edge such as a coastline. The places are organized in a serial continuity along the primary linear path or an edge or linked by short perpendicular paths or open spaces.

Set of Focal Points: another effective manner of organizing the form is through a set of focal points which are rooted in a meaningful manner to the local environment. It may be through a system of distinctive foci each having a strong sense of place in relation to its surrounding. Another way is to have a hierarchy of focal points with varying levels of significance. Otherwise the focal points can be strategically located and linked by a triangular web of paths.

Radial Star or a Ring form: A traditional method of organizing an urban form is a radial star with a single dominant centre and with multiple radial pathways going outward along which subsidiary

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centres can be aligned. The inverse of the radial star configuration is the ring form where a single ring with a open centre or several concentric rings connected by radial pathways moving inward defines the urban form.

Group of Districts : most neighbourhoods as seen in the present day context is organized as a group of districts. Either each district can be equally distinctive Each district may not have defined shape but has distinctive boundaries separated by network of nodes or multiple districts held together by a neutral background. Another prevalent organization is to have districts of defined shape organized geometrically.

Organisation of Paths: A prevalent method of organizing urban form which allows a natural growth is to have the region organized by a network of paths. The paths can be a irregular web or a geometric system. In most urban organisations defined by paths the place may be remembered as a sequence of visual paths

Space, Place and Identity

Lively streets and public spaces are often seen as indicators of successful communities. Despite our increased capacities for mobility it is important that there is a diverse opportunity and mixed use development within walkable reach from the place of stay. Such opportunities will not only create a inclusive sense of community, but also increase the vitality of neighborhood and well being of the people.Relph, E C. (1976) observes that setting, activity and meaning are three components are always bound together in our experiences of places, yet they are clearly distinguishable from each other and are irreducible one to another.

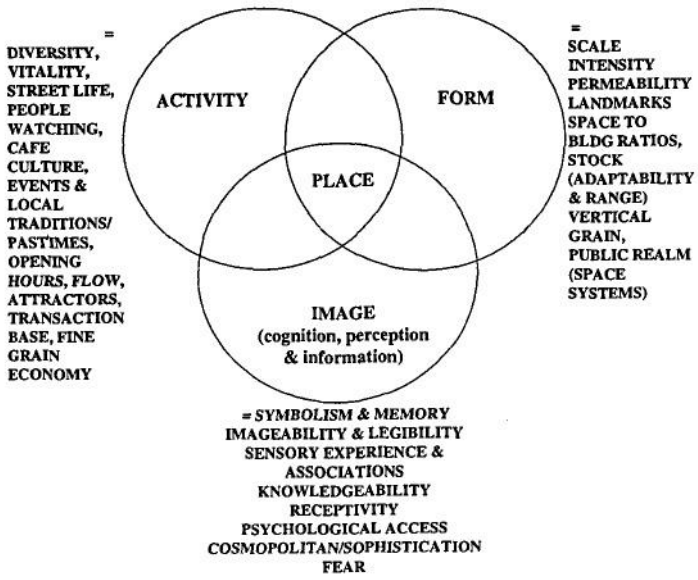

Fig 01: Policy directions to foster Urban Sense of Place

Source : John Montgomery (1998)

Montgomery argues that every place has an identity and an image. The identity being an objective construct and the image being more subjective of how the place is being perceived. This is where the significance of legibility of urban form arises. The form and urban design parameters

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should be able to build a legible urban form to stimulate the activities and aid in building the identity of the place.The time dimension which can be instantaneous or cyclical shall also be taken into consideration while creating the identity to the place.

Study Area

Description of Study area and the Sub-Sites

The study area is located in Koundampalayam of Coimbatore District. Coimbatore City Municipal Corporation (CCMC) in collaboration with GIZ India are conducting the Co(Vai)-Design Competition, as a part of the "Sustainable Urban Development - Smart Cities" (SUD-SC) project. The overall study area spans 105 acres and comprises of five distinct subsites with distinct subsites. The site forms a perfect premise for study since it has characteristics of planned developments, unplanned squatters, open areas, natural features and organic development over years.

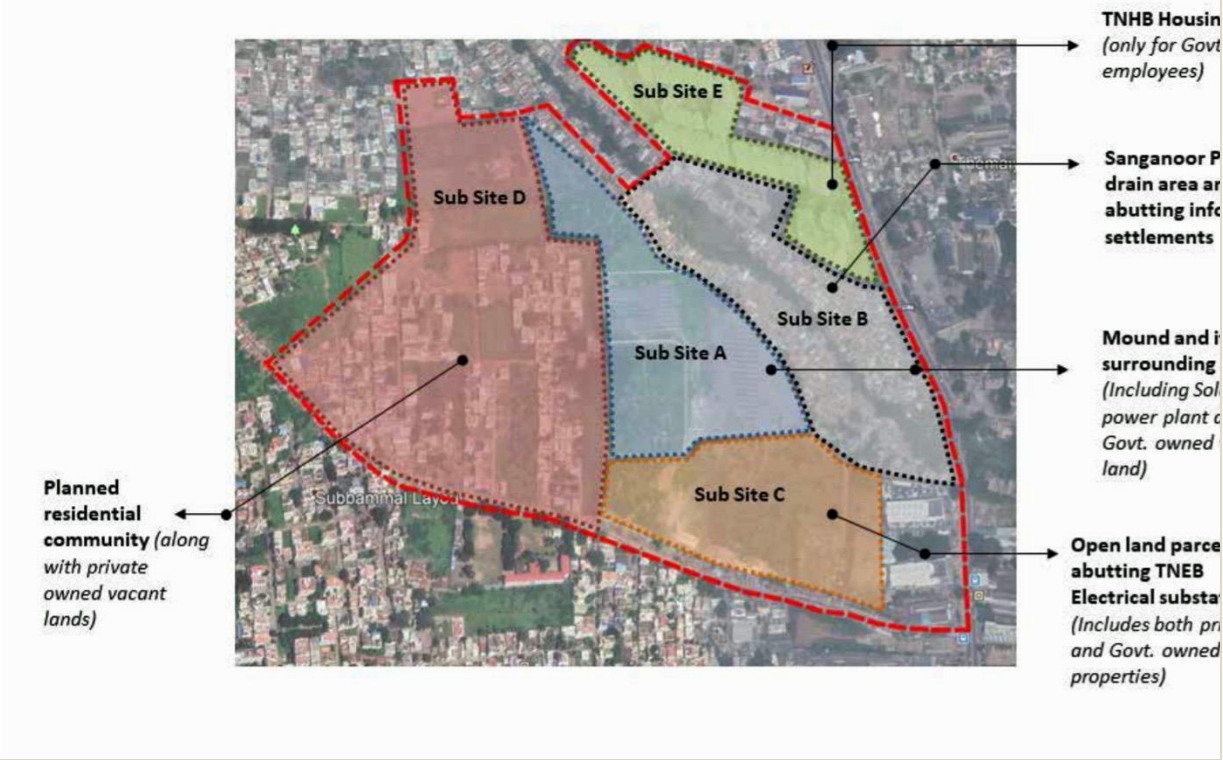

Fig 02: Study Area and Sub-Site Demarcation.

Source : Co(Vai)-Design Competition, Sustainable Urban Development - Smart Cities (SUD-SC) project

Sub Site – A

The Subsite- A spanning 17 acres was originally an adobe of migratory birds which later got converted into a municipal dumpyard until 2003. Efforts were taken in 2007 to revive the area to its original glory and the land was capped and converted to a park. Until today the land is used as a park and the primary access is from the northern side. The site also houses solar power plant within its boundary and the generated power is supplied to the grid. The most prominent feature

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of this site is the man made mound to its south which was developed as a park by capping the waste dump yard. Most part of the site is walled and the site is accessible through the Prabhu Nagar road, which connects the site from Mettupalayam mainroad.

Sub Site – B

The Subsite – B is a linear configuration of 19 acres and developed on either side of the Sanganoor canal. It is an ecologically sensitive area and comprises of informal developments which includes the squatter settlements of the Dr. Ambedkar Nagar, Prabu Nagar, Anna Nagar and the MGR Nagar. The development is organic and residential encroachments stretch until the edge of the water body. Although the development edge is proximate to the waterbody it may be noted that the area is not subject to flooding and related issues.

Sub Site – C

The Subsite – C is predominantly an open area stretching over 17 acres which was used as a dumping yard with icineration plant for waste management until 2007 by the corporation of Coimbatore. The site has a privately owned vacant land bordering the Metupalayam Road. The Metupalayam Road is other wise populated with commercial establishments along its stretch. The encroachments along the Jeeva Nagar have been recently cleared and the frontage of the site has a prominent road edge. The settlement can be classified under informal low rise high density character.

Sub Site – D

The Sub Site D is a 44 acre planned settlement predominantly comprising of residential development. The network extends through residential development towards the north and the west. The eastern border is the park delineated by subsite A. The site has well established network of roads and proximate to Mettupalayam road. The subsite also has good accessibility along with commercial intermittent convenience facilities and commercial developments along its fringe. The infrastructure such as the roads and the water supply are executed by the authorities. The settlement can be classified under formal low-rise high-density character.

Sub Site – E

The Subsite E is a 10 acre parcel which comprises of 1800 dwelling units developed and promoted by the Tamil Nadu Housing board primarily focussing on the government employees. The site has connectivity to the Metupalayam high road towards the east. It shares an edge with the informal squatter settlements of the Subsite B along the Sanganoor Canal. Road Networks are well developed and has a good accessibility to the adjoining main roads through public transportation modes to different parts of the city. It carries a strong imposing character and can be classified as a high-rise high-density development.

Methodology and Attributes of Study

The set of indicators was formulated based on theoretical studies and interview with stakeholders. The local conditions of five distinct zones with specific characteristics were subject to detailed questionnaire survey.

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Diverse indicators are deployed to empirically evaluate the parameters on Physical Attributes, Activity, Image, Safety, Comfort and the Infrastructure of the study area. Through initial studies and discussion with respondents the following attributes were queried under physical attributes of place identity : Hierarchy of roads, networks forming connectivity, intersections, footpaths, legibility & structure, urban density, building form & massing, building heights, façade line, roofline, building materials, mix of building, open spaces, natural features, cost of housing, public buildings, and the availability of facilities catalyzing useful walk. Several attributes were studied under activities: public transport, vehicular dominance, pedestriandominance, activity spread through the clock, mix of activity, diversity of People and the activity notes. Several parameters were studied under the image attributes: streetscape, building façade, edges, natural features, landmarks, cultural significance, street art, unique features and visual impact of services. The following attributes were taken as the parameters to study the safety and comfort: people watching, transparent façade, eyes on the street, places to rest, features provide comfortable walk and stopover activities. Infrastructure and Maintenance parameters were studied through queries on the following attributes: studies through the followed: drainage facilities, sewage, road maintenance and other services maintenance.

A questionnaire encompassing all these attributes to assess the attributes which play an important role in ascertaining the identity and delineating any neighborhood was used for the study. Well informed enumerators in the subject area were deployed to conduct the survey.

PLACE IDENTITY

		Mean Value					
Components	**N = 49**	**Sub Site A**	**Sub Site B**	**Sub Site C**	**Sub Site D**	**Sub Site E**	**Overall Mean**
Physical Parameters	Hierarchy of Roads	4.84	5.67	5.29	6.55	6.04	**5.04**
	Network / Connectivity / Road Width	4.59	5.31	5.84	6.51	6.31	
	Intersections	4.69	5.65	5.67	6.57	6.00	
	Footpaths	3.80	4.33	4.10	4.73	5.76	
	Legibility & Structure	4.31	4.53	3.84	6.08	7.12	
	Urban Density	4.04	4.69	3.39	6.49	7.78	
	Building Form & Massing	3.63	4.24	3.43	6.20	8.45	
	Building Heights	3.33	4.61	3.00	5.76	7.47	
	Façade Line	4.04	4.67	3.04	5.86	7.39	
	Roofline	4.12	4.57	3.04	6.16	6.80	
	Building Materials	3.61	5.10	3.31	6.16	5.37	
	Mix of Building	7.92	4.63	7.96	5.65	4.31	
	Open Spaces	6.18	5.80	4.88	4.86	3.71	
	Natural Features	3.67	3.88	3.63	6.27	6.86	
	Cost of Housing	3.86	3.39	3.37	4.49	4.51	
	Public Buildings	5.47	4.29	3.51	4.33	5.18	
	Facilities catalysing useful walk	3.16	4.63	4.04	3.84	6.33	
	Mean	4.43	4.71	4.20	5.68	6.20	
Activity	Public Transport Facility	3.51	5.06	5.31	5.39	6.88	**5.41**
	Vehicular Dominance	4.84	6.14	4.67	6.69	6.47	
	Pedestrian Dominance	3.92	6.51	4.59	5.73	5.96	
	Activity Spread through the clock	4.16	5.76	3.84	5.33	5.51	
	Mix of Activity	4.63	6.76	4.08	7.12	6.67	
	Diversity of People/ Mix of Age Group	4.90	6.82	4.04	7.22	6.51	
	Activity Nodes	4.59	5.92	3.92	4.78	5.27	
	Mean	**4.36**	**6.14**	**4.35**	**6.04**	**6.18**	
Image	Streetscape /Building Facade	3.69	4.86	3.51	5.90	6.14	**4.52**
	Streetscape Edges	4.10	4.88	3.90	5.49	5.65	
	Natural Features	5.86	5.73	4.29	4.63	3.92	
	Landmarks	5.53	5.10	3.76	4.67	6.27	
	Cultural Significance	3.59	6.00	3.02	4.57	4.39	
	Street Art	2.55	2.90	2.00	2.71	3.10	
	Unique Features	5.94	5.31	3.61	3.61	5.31	
	Visual impact of Services	4.82	4.63	4.12	5.20	5.59	
	Mean	**4.51**	**4.93**	**3.53**	**4.60**	**5.05**	
Safety & Comfort	People Watching	3.57	5.92	3.31	5.12	6.31	**4.53**
	Transparent Façade / Eyes on the Street	4.00	5.63	3.10	4.71	5.78	
	Places to Rest	4.53	4.45	3.27	4.96	5.16	
	Features provide comfortable walk	4.27	3.92	3.37	5.27	5.76	
	Stopover Activities	3.86	4.82	3.22	3.63	5.35	
	Mean	**4.04**	**4.95**	**3.25**	**4.74**	**5.67**	
Infra & Maintenance	Drainage Facilities / Sewage	3.84	3.14	4.10	6.08	6.82	**4.79**
	Road Maintenance	3.20	3.80	3.55	5.90	7.08	
	Other Service Maintenance	4.06	3.61	4.10	5.88	6.61	
	Mean	**3.70**	**3.52**	**3.92**	**5.95**	**6.84**	
	Overall Mean	**4.33**	**4.94**	**3.95**	**5.43**	**5.95**	

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Discussion on Study outcome

The responses received from the users on the various parameters on Physical Attributes, Activity, Image, Safety, Comfort and the Infrastructure of the study area in different sub-sites were evaluated. The Mean of the various sub-categories and the Overall Mean of the each site for all the parameters was deduced. Out of the 5 Sub-Sites, A & C is relatively less built up compared to sub sites B, D & E. The results of the study also highlights that the sites with increased built-up structures have scored better in terms of creating a place identity among the users. Even an informal shanty development in Sub-Site B has scored over the Subsite A & C which has less built up structures. The subsite D & E which has a strong urban built up character has clearly scored well above the other sub-sites in creating the place identity. It is also deduced from the studies that Activities and Physical Parameters of the study area carry higher significance than the remaining parameters of Image, Safety & Comfort and Infrastructure. This clearly implies that directly conceivable parameters are significant than subjective and implied parameters in creating place identity.

Conclusion

Without the place identity the urban spaces becomeincreasingly lifeness and devoid of character eventually losing its vitality over time. It has been deduced through this study that the built form has a strong influence in building the place identity than the other factors closely followed by the activity. Hence the identity of the built form should be consciously improved by constructing a structured image with a legible character such as a system of paths, a constellation of linked focal paths and a thoughtfully curated form. The built form should be compatible to the activities especially at the street level forming a rich public realm. A person should be able to organize the region in mind both as a static map and as a system of sequences and activities through experience. As highlighted in the study, built environment has a greater role in ascertaining the place identity and hence should seek to achieve a legibility among its inhabitants through the form, which supports the activity and the associated image it constructs

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