

# Understanding Elements of Local Identity of Place: Physical vs. Personal-Social Attributes

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## Introduction

There has been a growing concern that local communities, towns, cities, and regions are losing their identity in the midst of rapid globalization and urbanization. Standardization of built form, the erosion of distinct local and regional landscapes, and geographic mobility are thought to undermine the physically-encoded meanings of the landscape, thus weakening personal identification with locale (Cuba & Hummon, 1993; Relph 1976). Although design professionals have frequently debated the loss of local or regional identity (Cook, 1987; Correa, 1992; Alexander et al., 1977), it is difficult to find research that defines principles of local identity in the design field (Schuster, 1989). On the other hand, social scientists have long been studying place identity from the perspective of personal identity or self-identity.

This paper attempts to develop a comprehensive, working model of place and its identity. This is a theoretical paper, aiming to understand views from the design and social science fields on local identity of place, by drawing materials from the literature. The goal is to develop hypotheses for elements of identity of place with the hope that these hypotheses can be tested in future empirical research. I will explore similarities and differences between the two fields' views on identity of place and investigate what each field can learn from the other. I will then propose a preliminary model of identity of place by combining the strengths of both fields. In this study, "local identity of place" refers to the local character of a place that makes it different from other places. "Place" mainly refers to a large-scale environment such as a neighborhood, a community, or a town.

## The Design Field and Physical Identity

'Identity of place model' in the design field refers primarily to physical identity of place and relies on physical attributes of the built environment. Many contemporary design professionals borrow or even copy traditional architectural attributes when designing modern buildings in order to preserve the local identity and character of the built environment, without fully investigating underlying principles of local identity (Schuster, 1989). Vale (1992) describes numerous cases where designers mimic traditional architectural motifs in the design of governmental buildings, districts, and capital cities in many countries in search of identity of place or identity of nations. Neo-traditional designers, such as Duany, design communities that emulate char-

acteristics of pre W.W.II communities to achieve a sense of place or identity of place (Duany & Plater-Zyberk, 1992). For example, the feeling of Duany's Kentlands development recalls local, intimately scaled towns in the Maryland/Virginia vernacular, with strong architectural references to the past that blend Federal, Classical Revival, and other styles (Southworth, 1997). Designers also rely on natural elements to preserve identity of place. According to the survey conducted by "Landscape Architecture" magazine (Sharkey, 1985), the majority of design professionals believe that new buildings should blend in harmoniously with the surrounding natural elements. For example, the landscape at Kentlands retains many mature trees and topographic features, and the grading and siting of buildings show much sensitivity to the natural setting of surrounding areas, all of which help maintain a sense or identity of place (Duany & Plater-Zyberk, 1992; Southworth, 1997).

Design scholars also focus on physical aspects of local identity of place in their theoretical studies. According to Lynch (1981), uniqueness, congruence, significance, and other elements constitute a sense of place that he uses interchangeably with identity, "the simplest form of sense," which makes a place distinctive and different from other places. Mumford (1961) stated that regional character is the outcome of evolution or continuity in the development process of the built environment. Alexander (1987) argues for making "wholeness" the central goal of urban design. He also proposes that wholeness referring to an overall character of place is produced by continuity and coherence, among other things. An urban designer/scholar, Trancik (1986) stresses the "linkage" concept, which consists of continuity, contextuality, harmony, and balance in the design of the urban environment in order to preserve an overall urban identity and character. Similarly, urban design scholars Goldstein and Elliott (1993) illustrate how visual and physical principles such as balance, proportion, symmetry, similarity, clarity, compatibility, and harmony can help urban designers create urban identity. Lastly, Kelbaugh (1997), a proponent of New Urbanism, emphasizes concepts of coherence, continuity, contextuality, imageability, legibility, and beauty, all of which help achieve local-regional identity or character.

On the whole, the identity of place model in the design field is physically based and focused on the following five factors. A brief review of these concepts seems appropriate. Continuity: traditional design elements are often utilized in the design of

new buildings in search of a distinctive character of place. Alexander et al. (1977) also suggest that a unique place relies on continuity, such as one's awareness of one's past places and the history of the surrounding physical environment. Uniqueness: the main goal of preserving a sense of identity of place is to differentiate the local place from other places. To do so, design experts often suggest preserving the indigenous architectural/urban heritage and local natural landscape and making the new building(s) blend in with the distinctive, local built environment and its natural surroundings. Significance: buildings and places of local, cultural importance are preserved to maintain a sense of local identity. For example, Lynch (1981) defines significance of place in terms of the presence of historic events and other symbolic qualities that are manifested in some buildings or districts of the local community. Compatibility: new buildings are designed and placed in the existing urban fabric in such a way as to achieve a contextual fit between the new and the present elements so as to maintain identity of place. Cohesiveness: this is achieved by making a community's built environment homogeneous (e.g., similar in style throughout) and intimate (e.g., in terms of a coherent overall urban design pattern and, sometimes, a clear boundary), which would help preserve a strong sense of identity of urban place.

### Social Science and Personal-Social Identity

In this paper, the social science field includes environment and behavior, community psychology, phenomenological geography, and social psychology. The place identity model in social science primarily focuses on personal identity, which depends on personal and social meaning and behavior. Proshansky et al. (1983: p.57) define place-identity as "a sub-structure of the self-identity of the person consisting of...cognitions about the physical world in which the individual lives..." This and their other statements, such as "place-identity as a personal construction," make it clear that place-identity is an element of personal identity that focuses on personal identification with place, not so much on physical identity per se. They particularly emphasize the importance of continuity (e.g., personal evolution in place), uniqueness (e.g., personalization of place), and significance (e.g., positive evaluation of self), all of which emphasize personal attributes of place-identity.

Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) suggest four principles of place identity which guide action: continuity (e.g., the development and maintenance of self over time, influenced by qualities of places), self-esteem (e.g., a positive evaluation of oneself or the group with which one identifies), self-efficacy (e.g., a fit between an individual's capacity to function or to meet situational demands and the manageability of the environment), and distinctiveness (e.g., an individual's place identification in order to distinguish oneself from others). They suggest that place identifications can be thought of as comparable to social identifications. These four principles stress the personal-social aspects of identity of place, not paying thorough attention to physical

attributes or characteristics of place.

Hummon, in his book *Commonplaces* (1990: p.142), defines a community identity as "an interpretation of self that uses community as a locus of attachment or an image for self-characterization," or "the individual identification with community." Similarly, Cuba & Hummon's place identity model (1993) suggests that individuals use personal identification of place to differentiate themselves from others (i.e., emphasizing distinctiveness). In addition, Cuba and Hummon's place identity (1993) suggests that one preserves place identity through personal affiliation with the place where one belongs (i.e., emphasizing compatibility or membership). At the core of both personal identification and affiliation is the self-concept, which is central to the formation of identity of place.

Lastly, Lalli (1992) developed "an Urban-Identity Scale" which consists of five dimensions. These are evaluation (e.g., the function of an individual resident's self-enhancement regarding the town's perceived uniqueness and special character), attachment (e.g., a sense of belongingness or rootedness), continuity (e.g., the connection between an individual's own biography over time and the town), familiarity (e.g., the effects of an individual's daily experiences in the town), and commitment (e.g., the perceived significance of the town for a personal future, the commitment to want to stay). The five dimensions of urban-related identity deal mainly with diverse aspects of personal identification with the town, not so much with the physical identity of the town.

On the whole, the place identity model in social science emphasizes personal-social attributes in the following five dimensions. Continuity pertains to attributes such as personal evolution over time, familiar qualities of the individual's past environment, personal memories, family history, and local traditions, which are important to an individual or the group with which one identifies. Proshansky et al (1983) state that the environmental past of the person is at the core of maintaining the self-identity of the person over time. Also, Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996)'s findings suggest that a person seeks a place felt to be congruent with her settlement identification, in order to preserve continuity of self as a specific type of person.

Uniqueness signifies that a person uses a place identification to distinguish herself from others. For example, Lalli (1992) states that residents' association with a specific town or area of town enables her to differentiate herself from people from other areas. Similarly, Twigger-Ross and Uzzell's study (1996) reports that distinctiveness establishes that person as having a specific type of relationship with her home environment, which is clearly distinct from any other type of relationship. Research into settlement identity (Feldman, 1990) and community identity (Hummon, 1990) has focused on the perceived uniqueness associated with being a "city" or "country" person.

Significance is concerned with a person's feeling of worth or social value, which is significant to a person. The desire to maintain a positive conception of oneself has been regarded as a central motive by many writing about the self, especially within

social identity theory (Hogg and Abrams, 1988). When a resident feels good about living in a locale, and has self-esteem or pride in living in her residential community, it helps her feel positive about herself and the place becomes significant to her. The positive impressions may foster self-identity.

Compatibility is attained when contextual fit between self (e.g., individual lifestyle) and the environment (e.g., places, their properties, and services the place offers residents) exists. Consequently, facilities and services that the place provides would serve instrumentally in the satisfaction of the person's biological, psychological, social, and cultural needs (Proshansky et al.; 1983). It also means that individuals are able to carry out their chosen activities in their own way and to fulfill their own goals in a manageable environment (Twigger-Ross and Uzzell; 1996). Thus this compatibility preserves personal identity of place in which the person chooses to reside.

Cohesiveness is about emotional ties or personal belonging to the place or group, as one feels a shared emotional connection. For example, Cuba and Hummon (1993) define place identity as an expression of affiliation or at-homeness. Similarly, Lalli (1992) identifies rootedness or belongingness as part of the dimensions of urban-related identity. On the whole, cohesiveness pertains to emotional bonding to the environment with which a person identifies. In this way, cohesiveness engenders attachment, which reinforces personal identity of place.

In summary, both the design and social science fields share the five aspects of identity of place: continuity, uniqueness, significance, compatibility, and cohesiveness. However, the design field focuses on physical identity of place by emphasizing physical aspects of these five factors. In contrast, social science focuses on personal identity of place by stressing personal-social aspects of these same factors (see table on page X).

## What Each Field Can Learn From the Other

The identity of place model in each field has its own strengths and weaknesses due in part to inherently different disciplinary focuses. Place consists, however, of physical attributes, people's activities, and people's meaning (or conceptions) according to Canter's theory of place (1977). Therefore, the identity of place models of both fields should complement each other to achieve a greater sense of identity of place.

Regarding continuity, before blindly imitating architectural elements of a bygone era in modern environmental design, designers should investigate whether that approach is the best way to bring a memorable history or tradition to life in the present day context. Social scientists can suggest to designers that residents would benefit more from making references only to a certain history or tradition that is meaningful to them in their community. Achieving a local identity of place should be part of a community's collective decision-making process in which members can actively participate and decide which aspects of community tradition should be meaningfully preserved. Furthermore,

social scientists and designers can work together to educate the public by emphasizing further the "active" focus of local identity over the "passive" focus. In order to preserve continuity of self as a specific type of person, people look for places and move to those that seem to represent their values (Feldman, 1990). This may be a more passive way of preserving continuity of self and place identity, because if a person is no longer happy with the environment, she can simply walk away from an area to find another place to live that is congruent with the self and satisfying. In contrast, Duncan (1973) suggests that the physical environment can be modified through community participation in order to represent present selves and to present a new self, arguably a more active way of preserving place identity.

As for uniqueness, it is desirable for designers to preserve local characteristics of both the man-made and natural environment, so as to achieve a unique character of the place. A personal identity aspect of the place identity model, which argues that uniqueness is achieved through personal identification with place, suggests that if the built environment is designed so as to allow residents to change their own environment, uniqueness can be accomplished and identity of place may be better achieved. However, uniqueness can be also achieved in a collective way, if it really matters to the identity of group or neighborhood. For example, through a community design charette, residents can attempt to define their community character. Thus, I suggest that social scientists put more emphasis on the collective aspect of place identity. Uniqueness in the context of community design requires not only personal or individual identification of place but also group identification of place in the collective (i.e., group-based) decision-making process. Consequently, groups of residents can participate in the process of differentiating (e.g., through creative design) their community from other communities.

Concerning significance, designers who argue for historic preservation greatly appreciate the value of buildings or places of historic importance in local, regional, or national contexts. Social scientists also suggest that an individual resident feels a sense of pride or feels good about living in the place of historic or cultural significance. But both fields' approaches to achieving significance seem passive. Residents merely have to move into the place where there are buildings of cultural significance in order to experience pride. In contrast, an active way of accomplishing significance requires the active, collective participation of residents. Residents can take part in a long-term process of making their environment significant even when no historically significant place exists in their community. For example, groups of residents might plant trees in a common space to commemorate community members who died in gang violence. Feeling pride or feeling good about living in their community can grow as collective aspects of the community begin to be meaningful to their lives, and this growth can lead to a greater sense of local identity for them.

Compatibility also raises important issues. While designers worry more about an individual building's "physical" or "vi-

sual” fit in a larger community to preserve the overall character of the local built environment, social scientists are concerned more about whether or not individual residents feel they fit in their community and feel capable of preserving a sense of personal identity of place. In this regard, consider the following questions : does adding a particular new building in a given community context help the residents function comfortably and adequately in leading their everyday lives? Does a new building or place help the community to fulfill the needs of groups of residents better and to facilitate their life styles? When compatibility is achieved in both physical and personal contexts to serve the needs of the community, there is a greater chance of attaining identity of place in the local community. In this sense, I emphasize a collective aspect of compatibility more than a personal or individual-focused compatibility.

Cohesiveness concerns fostering a sense of community. While designers focus more on maintaining a sense of intimacy, homogeneity, or compactness in the built environment through physical designs, social scientists emphasize emotional bonding, affiliation, or belonging to a place or a group in the community. Although bonding can be achieved either individually or collectively, the personal identity focus of place identity seems limited and can be enriched by the collective focus. The collective perspective of identity stresses the group process of producing and fulfilling shared community goals. In this way, cohesiveness can be better achieved. Thus, a greater sense of local identity of place may be achieved when promoting physical intimacy (e.g., overall coherent urban character) or homogeneity (e.g., similar architectural style) in the neighborhood is a collective expectation of residents who share a sense of belonging and community values. Consequently, it may be possible to develop and maintain the personal element of identity further by addressing the collective perspective. For example, by actively participating in community development matters, one can feel good about oneself and the local community.

### **Towards a Working Model of Local Identity**

This section proposes an integration of personal-social and physical attributes of place into five key elements of local identity. It is hypothesized that local identity of place is engendered by uniqueness, continuity, significance, compatibility, and cohesiveness.

**Uniqueness or Distinctiveness:** Uniqueness is related to “differentiation” or “being different.” A person differentiates herself from others through associating with a group or a place that she likes and feels attached to. For example, residents who live in a fashionable part of London such as Highgate Village have a strong sense of uniqueness and differentiate themselves from people living in other parts of town (Twigger-Russ & Uzzell, 1996). If a resident differentiates herself from others who live in other communities and if her community has a unique physical character according to residents’ and outsiders’ perspectives, then her community may have a local identity. If there is one

(e.g., personal or self identity) without the other (e.g., physical character of the environment), the environment may exhibit a lower degree of identity of place. This proposition needs to be tested in empirical research in the future.

**Continuity:** Rowles (1983) showed that elderly members of an Appalachian community did not want to move, as the environment reminded them of their past, more active, selves. In this case, places act as referents to past selves and actions, and for some people, the maintenance of a link with that place provides a sense of continuity to their identity (Giuliani, 1991; Lalli, 1992). As for a physical aspect of place, a place has to have qualities that have been developed over time, since the character of place is a result of historical evolution (Mumford, 1961). These refer to physical or visual qualities that represent a local or regional history or tradition. If a resident feels that her current community has qualities that remind her of a past self, and she feels attached to the community; if her community has physical elements that help continue to maintain the character of the community, her community may have a local identity.

**Significance:** significance is related to self-esteem, pride, referring to a positive evaluation of oneself, the group, or the place with which one identifies. Korpela (1989) shows how favorite environments can support self-esteem. By living in an historic town a person can feel a sense of pride through association (Lalli, 1992). Place can be regarded as significant due to its historic or fashionable architectural features (Lalli, 1992). As for a physical attribute of place, in order for a place to have identity, a place should have its own (e.g., local or regional) significance such as historic or important local events, fashionable districts, prestigious institutions, special landscape, or special purpose districts which matter positively to a community (Trancik, 1989; Lynch, 1981; Alexander et al, 1977). If a resident feels a sense of pride or self-esteem through living in her community, and if the environmental characteristics of her community help foster a sense of significance, her community may have a local identity.

**Congruence or Compatibility:** an environment can support one’s ability to function. Distraction, confusion, inaccessibility of needed resources are among the many urban assaults on environmental compatibility. People are often well aware of such incompatibilities that increase effort and reduce satisfaction (Kaplan, 1984). Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) use a similar term—self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is regarded as high when the individual believes she can complete a task. This is increasingly regarded as important for psychological well-being (Leibkind, 1992). Congruence is the fit between a person and her sociophysical environment. A “good” fit exists when the environment facilitates a person’s everyday lifestyle and when she can perform well in that environment; congruence can, therefore, engender self-efficacy. A good fit also exists when a physical place meets people’s ideals and when the physical identity and the personal identity share a similar character. Also, a good fit exists when both the group’s and the individual’s needs are met simultaneously. It is hypothesized that if feelings of compatibility (i.e., my community and I fit each other really well)

<b>Similarities</b>	<b>Design Field</b> <i>(emphasizes physical attributes)</i>	<b>Social Science Field</b> <i>(emphasizes personal-social attributes)</i>
Continuity (e.g., making history or tradition alive)	making references to traditional design elements— traditional, architectural urban heritage, local tradition, history, culture	making references to properties of place that remind individuals of memorable personal history or group tradition— personal memory, familiar-looking environment (e.g., it looks familiar to an individual), personal, family or group history and tradition
Uniqueness(e.g., differentiation)	emphasizing local characteristics of the built and natural environment— local, in-digenous architectural & urban character, local landscape, local climate and geography	identifying self with place— personal character, personalization, personal identification of the built environment
Significance (e.g., positive evaluation)	preserving the built environment of local, historic and cultural importance— historic buildings, sites & buildings w/ local, national importance	positive feeling towards place that is meaningful to self— sense of pride, self-esteem, feeling good about living in locale
Compatibility (e.g., finding fit)	making individual buildings fit each other in a larger context— contextualism, fit between buildings or between an individual building and the whole, fit between community's preference and developers' preference	fit between self and properties/functions of place— fit between self (individual lifestyle) and what the environment offers
Cohesiveness (e.g., fostering a sense of community or wholeness)	achieving character of whole— intimacy, homogeneity, compactness	personal affiliation of place with shared emotional ties— bonding, belonging, membership, shared emotional connection, shared community values, a sense of homeness

and self-efficacy are maintained, a local identity may exist in the community.

Cohesiveness: cohesiveness is related to a sense of homogeneity, intimacy, and compactness. Residents living in such a homogeneous, intimate, and compact community may feel part of the community. In this way, cohesiveness is also related to what Barnett-Lennard calls “the felt experience of belonging, connection, shared meanings, of being in relation with fellow members” (1994). Mcmillan and Chavis (1986) use cohesiveness to narrowly define a sense of community: a sense of cohesive community is a feeling that members have a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together. A sense of cohesiveness in a community requires that members search for their own identities as well as maintain a collective identity (e.g., community identity), believing that the identities of both members and the group matter to the survival of both residents and the environment. Regarding the physical aspects of a community, there should be communal places where the residents come together to experience a spirit of community. In addition, the urban elements of a community should provide residents with opportunities to interact with each other casually and to experience the character of their local environment (Duany & Plater-Zyberk, 1992). The identity or character of a local community can also be achieved by making the urban environment intimate (e.g., a coherent overall urban order), compact, or homogeneous (e.g., a similar architectural style). It is hypothesized that if a resident feels a sense of belonging or connection to her community, and if the physical environments of her community help foster a sense of cohesiveness, then a local identity may exist.

## Conclusion

Although the design and social fields focus on different aspects of local identity, the identity of place models promoted by both fields seem to concentrate on these five dimensions of identity of place: continuity, uniqueness, significance, compatibility, and cohesiveness. The model of each field relies on a different method or perspective to examine the five elements of identity and eventually to preserve a local identity. While the design field focuses on a physical identity construct, relying on physical attributes of local identity, the social science field focuses on a personal identity or a self-identity construct, emphasizing personal-social attributes of place identity. Both models have weaknesses and strengths, since they focus on limited aspects of identity of place. Designers' physical identity construct can be more useful to preserving identity of place and beneficial to local residents by paying attention to personal and collective attributes of identity. The goal is to emphasize a collective decision-making process and community residents' shared values so as to help create a better physical environment for the majority of people. Similarly, the social scientists' personal identity model can be much more effective in preserving place identity in a local environment by actively considering the physical and collective attributes of identity. The goal is to understand in depth the physical characteristics of a community that may affect the personal and group identities. Also, the two identity constructs can complement one another to achieve a greater understanding of identity of place. Lastly, by combining the major strengths and characteristics of both identity models (e.g., personal-social attributes and physical attributes), I have proposed the five elements of identity of place, which need to be empirically tested in a further study.

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