Abstract

Place identity is a fundamental aspect that contributes to shape the identity of communities. This research investigates a deeper understanding of urban identity. It aims at studying the different approaches of remodeling and re-establishing identity in local urban spaces in a way that matches modern design principles and sustainability while conserving the local identity. As a guide to this process, study of a relevant example that attempt to revive place identity will be explored. In the end, the guidelines formulated will be applied to develop Al Morsi Abul-Abbas Mosque Complex public square in Alexandria, to put emphasis on the place's identity.

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Keywords: Identity; heritage; regionalism; revival; urban design; social sustainability.

1. Introduction

Identity is the foundation to place attachment and sense of belonging. It is a reflection of people's traditions, culture, aspirations, needs, and their future. In the past, the local community with its beliefs and creative abilities was an integral part of the design and building process. Consequently, the architectural product succeeded in expressing the identity of this community and maintained elements of continuity and distinction. Nowadays, most of the design and building processes are based on imported trends, and the product is alien and does not express the values of the community and local urban spaces lost their identity. This contradiction represents the key issue of the crisis of identity in contemporary Arab city. Arab architecture is suffering from the absence of values and principles derived from the architectural heritage, ignorance of local climate and materials, in addition to the lack of integrating modern technology
with local values. Tradition must be respected but development is the key of our existence. Development and identity could move in parallel. Architectural styles and techniques could also be developed with respect to their original ideals.

This research investigates a deeper understanding of urban identity and heritage. It aims at studying the different approaches of remodeling and re-establishing identity in local urban spaces in a way that matches modern design principles and sustainability using new materials, expression, abstraction, and sustainable intent, while maintaining and conserving the local identity. An approach that blends between the traditional and the modern to revive the urban identity must be devised and applied. As a guide to this process, study of a relevant example that attempt to revive place identity will be explored. In the end, the guidelines formulated will be applied to develop Al Morsi Abul-Abbas Mosque Complex public square in Alexandria, to put emphasis on the place's identity.

2. Problem Statement:

In this age of globalization and environmental crisis, the ethical consciousness is heightened and the desire to design appropriately for a place, its climate and people, with appropriate technology is increasing. The major obstacle is the way that architects generally think about what is modern and traditional exclusively in formal terms. Accordingly the first implies rejection of historical models, standardization, and an abstract purity of form, open frame structures and flexible spaces, while the second implies historical and vernacular forms, variety, rich lines and solid wall structures.

The problem has two sides that lead to the same result which is the loss of identity. One of them is that urban designers do not understand the importance of the urban space so in turn build lifeless spaces with no particular design, use or identity. The other side of the problem is the modern approach that has lead to an international identity cancelling local identities.

Influences that are labeled “modern”, and “innovative” impose a one-dimensional view of how cities should work. This is a step backward from what cities need: more humane, sustainable cities for the 21st century. The problem is that both approaches fail to regard the people's needs. In the first case, the poorly designed empty squares may either be deserted or it may grow organically through a series of adaptations and additions by the people. This results in a disorganized public space with no order or defining features. The second approach also disregards people's needs by offering modern, innovative designs that people fail to interact with. Therefore, the designed spaces do not respect culture, social traditions and even the human scale.

3. Methodology:

This research uses an inductive and deductive methodology through data collection to achieve a deeper understanding about identity, urban identity and different approaches to revive the urban identity. This could be done by analyzing the local adaptations and additions done to already existing spaces through field visits and interviews with people to understand their points of view and needs. Through an analytical methodology a relevant example that attempt to reinvent the local identity will be studied. Thus, guidelines for re-inventing local urban identity will be devised to be applied to the urban redesign of El Al Morsi Abul Abbas Mosque Complex public plaza.

4. Definition of Identity:

Identity is neither an easily reducible, nor a separable quality of places—it is neither constant and absolute, nor is it constantly changing and variable. Identity is the glue which binds people together and
connects them to place. It is the opposite of rootlessness. It brings a sense of belonging, a cohesive force which can be powerful enough to overcome some aspects of economic deprivation and physical decline. A strong sense of identity can be an attractor, bringing new investment and talent into an area. [1]

Identity is a process, and not a found object. It may be linked to the trail left by civilization as it moves through history. The trail is the culture, or identity, of that civilization. Being a process, identity cannot be fabricated. Identity is not a self-conscious thing, we find our identity by understanding ourselves and our environment. It is a by-product of looking at our real problems, rather than self-consciously trying to find identity as an end in itself, without worrying about the issues we face. [2]

Efforts to maintain continuity of tradition are strongly linked to the impact of religion within our culture. These traditions can be linked with what is called the “cultural core.” It differentiates the cultural core from “peripheral” values, which are modified according to changes in life circumstances. Unlike these changing peripheral values, it is argued that the cultural core continues as a determining factor in the creation of individual identity. Most of the suggestions for maintaining identity center on re-using traditional images. [3]

4.1. Definition of Urban Identity:

Urban identity is a reflection of all the local people's traditions, culture, aspirations grouped together. It reflects their needs, their successes, their failures and their future. Constricted, the city is understood and interpreted through the technical rather than the sensory, yet it is the sensory from which we build feeling and emotion. Sensuous requirements may coincide or conflict with other demands but cannot be separated from them in designing or judging urban spaces.

Social identity is basically derived from the belonging to or affiliation to precise categories, ethnic groups, socio professional categories, religions, nationals, etc. with which individuals identify themselves and which generate a group of internal and external attributions that define this identity. However, they appear as axes from which urban identity are formed as a substructure of social identity. The vital importance of public urban spaces is historical. The image of many squares was closely tied to the great civic buildings located nearby, such as cathedrals, city halls, or libraries. Today, creating a square that becomes the most significant place in a city—that gives identity to whole communities—is a huge challenge. Any place should have its own special character to distinguish it from other places. The most significant determinant of the urban identity is the local urban context that is formed by all elements of the physical and natural elements. Conservation encourages identity since old environments are more usually part of common heritage.

Cultural identity in contrast to individual identity concentrates on groups or social systems. By that, space is one of the most important preconditions to develop cultural identity e.g. in its function as a symbol, as space, where interactions take place. [4,5]

The notion of “identity” involves numerous determinants such as those of political and social order. As such, it seems to be a “complex adaptive system”. Since cities are constantly changing, and evolving new forms, their urban identity is created through the complex interaction of natural, social and built elements. Therefore, the urban environment has to be considered from a historical perspective, not merely by understanding historically significant buildings, but rather through the evolution of the local urban context, with respect to human activity, built form, and nature. There were many approaches to the identity – modernism debate.

4.2. Identity Preservation and Sustainability:
Sustainability has three main aspects: the environmental, social and economic aspects. While the environmental aspect is all everyone talks about now, sometimes the social aspect is forgotten and people claim to have reached sustainability only through environmental solutions. Social sustainability, like environmental sustainability, strives to take future generations into consideration, and to live with the awareness that our actions make an impact on others and the world at large. These aspects include sustaining social justice, equity, relationships, character, etc. 

In general a well designed space is characterized by character, continuity and enclosure, quality of the public realm, ease of movement, legibility, adaptability, and diversity. All these elements combine to create a convivial interactive urban space that affects its users. Social Sustainability is really evident in the character aspect that constitutes one of the most imposing aspects of urban space. [6,7]

4.3. Basic elements of the urban identity:

The static physical setting, the activities, and the meaning constitute the three basic elements of the urban identity of places. [8,9]

The first two of these elements can probably be easily appreciated, but the component of meaning is much more difficult to grasp. Much more focus must be put on the sense of place which is the aura and impression of this place. Meaning and character have more than a purely visual or spatial dimension, and they cannot be instantly achieved by the implementation of a new urban design scheme.

Thus the physical component can be understood as comprising nature and the built environment. Similarly activities can be distinguished as being creative, destructive or passive. Meanings can change and be transferred from one set of objects to another, and they possess their own qualities of complexity, obscurity, or clarity. Since place identity is a sub-structure of the self-identity of the person consisting of broadly conceived cognitions about the physical world in which the individual lives. These cognitions represent memories, ideas, values, meanings, and conceptions of behavior and experience. The Arab urban & architectural features could be analyzed according to the previously mentioned elements as follows:[10]

Physical Settings:
- Tendency to look inwards – Architecture of courtyards and enclosed spaces.
- The use of geometric shapes and repetitive art (arabesque).
- The use of decorative arabic calligraphy
- The use of warm colors.
- Passive environmental management
- Dense Fabric

Activities:
- Public festivals, fairs & family picnics.
- Cultural plazas for public speeches and festivals.

Meaning:
- Private yet integrated community
- Religious spirit

5. Different modern approaches to identity revival:

1. Design ideas could be developed on the fact that traditional architecture and urban design is an indispensable reference for new projects. This includes a process of “Visual Abstraction” in which it alludes to past architecture in a photographic sense. It decomposes traditional architecture into elements, either at the level of facades or plan types, and then transfers them into projects. The copying is not literal
and involves some modification. The end result may be simpler than the original and different in the overall composition, but it must visually recall the historical source from which it is derived. [3]

2. There is another approach named “Conceptual Abstraction” in which it analyses past architecture in a manner that can yield rules and formulas for the new design. This abstraction is conceptual because there is no direct visual resemblance to past architecture and may reveal modern technology in full thrust.

Analytical Example: Beirut Central District Revival in Lebanon (Maarad-Nejmeh Square-Etoile.)

5.1. Historical Background:

Beirut city center contains sites and monuments spanning 5,000 years and layers of civilizations from the Canaanite to the Ottoman, and Mamluk periods. The Beirut Central District was destroyed during the Lebanese Civil War which extended from 1975 to 1990. Unable to reconstruct the center itself, the Lebanese government turned to a private Real Estate Holding Company (REHCO), known by the acronym Solidere, to take over the task of rebuilding. In 1991 Solidere was granted expropriation rights over the Beirut Central District area, a space of approximately 150 hectares. After gaining independence in 1943, Lebanon grew into a booming country due to its strong assets, its educated population, and its liberal economic and political system. Beirut became a cosmopolitan city and its center became a regional center for commerce, business, and tourism. [12,13]

Fig. 1. Analytical Example: Beirut Central District Revival in Lebanon (Maarad-Nejmeh Square-Etoile.)

5.2. Project Components & Approach:

The city center (BCD) is a culturally rich and sophisticated capital, vibrant with art, music and theatre, exhibitions and conferences; a music conservatoire, research, cultural and language centers, nursery, primary and secondary schools; a heritage villa turned into a private museum; a children's science museum; a regional research library and city archives. The master plan, comprising the traditional city center plus its modern extension on the waterfront, involves the installation of a completely modern infrastructure and provides an urban design framework for new construction and for the preservation of buildings. Reflecting the site topography and main natural features, the plan maximizes views of the sea and surrounding landscape including bays, hills and mountains, and creates boulevards and promenades.
Recognizing the city's heritage, it unearths many layers of history, preserves many buildings and townscape features, re-establishes its fabric and neighborhood structures. Combining tradition and innovation, it ensures the harmonious integration of traditional and modern architecture. It accommodates a broad mix of land uses including business, government, residential, as well as cultural and recreational facilities. \[14\]

5.3. Analysis of Identity treatment concerning Nejmeh Square & Maarad Street:

5.3.1. Physical settings:

a) Landscaping: Relatively little emphasis was put on the landscaping in the Nejmeh Square, compared to the rest of BCD, in keeping with its original French Mandate character. The choice of trees and plants aimed mostly at differentiating between the sub-areas by enhancing the character of each.

b) Hardscaping: Streets and sidewalk paving were designed to complement the characteristics of each sector. The paving scheme implemented in the historic core complements the rich stonework on building elevations. The choice of street finishing materials was used to distinguish between the vehicular and pedestrian roads, thus visually articulating the hierarchy of the traffic network. In the historic core, traditional paving, reminiscent of 1930s Beirut was installed using basalt cobblestones in pedestrian streets, new basalt tiles in vehicular streets and yellow granite in sidewalks. Overall this treatment provides visual continuity between pedestrian and vehicular surfaces and encourages outdoor activities.

c) Street furniture: Ornamental streetlights and lanterns were installed in the conservation area and modern lighting poles elsewhere. Street furniture (culvert ventilation towers, bus shelters, police kiosks, traffic barriers, telephone booths, benches, and planters) have been designed putting in consideration the original street character. In line with the historical character of the area, the lanterns, brackets and lampposts were replicated at their original manufacturer in France.

d) Building Restoration: Complete intricate restoration has been undertaken on the surrounding buildings. The restoration has confirmed the sustainability of traditional districts and their great potential for creating value once they are adapted to the needs of modern business and life. \[12, 13, 14\]

5.3.2. Activities:

Many activities have been introduced in Nejmeh square. They include retail, commercial, residential and recreational creating a lively neighborhood. Music Festivals are held there every year. It is also considered as a touristic destination as it explains the history of Lebanon.

5.3.3. Meaning:

This district in general holds numerous painful memories for the Lebanese people as it was one of the strongest showcases of war's effect on Lebanon. Yet, the new project puts aside some of these feelings and reinforces the feeling of hope and revival as it has become one of the successful focal points of Lebanon and the Middle East. It has now become a pride for all the Lebanese citizens as it illustrates their insistence and their ability to move on after war and become leaders once again.

6. Case study: Abu El-Abbas Mosque & Complex Square, Alexandria, Egypt.

6.1. Site location & historical background:
Abu al-Abbas lived in Alexandria for 43 years as a scholar and teacher until his death in 1286. He was buried in a small building near the eastern harbor in Alexandria. In 1307, El Sheikh Zein El Din Ibn El Qattan, one of the richest traders of Alexandria, funded a mausoleum and dome for the tomb, along with a small mosque. The tomb of Abu al-Abbas became a place of pilgrimage for many Muslims.

The mosque was periodically restored over the centuries. Most of the present structure dates from 1775, when the Algerian Sheikh Abu el Hassan El Maghreby built a much larger mosque on the site. It was fully renovated in 1863. The mosque was again beautified in 1943 under King Farouq I (r.1937-1952), who built the "Mosque Square." The square covers some 43,200 square meters and includes five other mosques centered around the Abu Al-Abbas Al-Mursi Mosque. The mosque was renovated in the Arabian style at a total cost of about 140,000 LE.

6.2. Analysis:

The architecture in the complex is very impressive and is in good condition. It undergoes maintenance regularly. The complex is surrounded by a fence wall of Islamic designs to ensure security at night. There are multiple entrances that lead to the complex. There is an entrance from all 4 sides of the zone, therefore facilitating accessibility. Only a small part of it allows the entrance of vehicles. The rest of it is a pedestrian only zone. The surroundings are mostly residential buildings of medium density and of no special architectural style. The plaza is elevated with almost 20 steps giving it a good surrounding view. It overlooks three mosques and two public gardens. It acts as the central space that binds all these mosques and spaces together. The elevated plaza is accessed by 3 staircases from different nodes. Underground shops and cafes are available under the plaza. If the mosque complex zone undergoes strong rehabilitation, it could be one of the most successful projects in Alexandria as it would attract many tourists and it would be a good representative of the local urban identity. By analyzing this urban space to identify the strengths & weaknesses as follows:

Strengths:
- Site surrounded by four streets makes it easily accessible
- The site is in an active, integral part of the city
- The complex can be reached by public transportation
- The presence of large green areas
- The complex includes several landmarks & is considered as a node.
- The public spaces are inviting & attractive.

Weaknesses:
- The plaza is viewed as a pass through and not a destination
- The gates doesn't invite the outdoor community to enter the park or the plaza
- Absence of seating, signage and street furniture in the park
- Absence of tenants & activities in the plaza
- Inadequate shading & lighting for the plaza
- No permanent security provided
- Low quality finishing for the plaza.
- Absence of parking spaces
• Lack of maintenance & cleanliness.
• Lack of identity and character.
• The street fair blocks the street sometimes.

6.3. Conceptual Design:

![Design Concept of El-Morsi Abou El-Abbas square](image01)

The main concept in design was to upgrade the square and make it a place which reflects the people's identity and at the same time meets the modern standards of design worldwide. An emphasis was put on the fact that modern Arabic architecture does not stand still in the old ages watching other cultures surpass it. It also, can develop and still have its own strong identity.

7. Guidelines for Re-inventing Identity in the Morsi Abou El-Abbas Square:

Physical settings:

The design concept aims at introducing modern design through floor patterns, shading elements & street furniture which are derived from the main lines and designs of arabic calligraphy and ornament after being abstracted.

A respect for the main mosque Al Morsi Abul Abbas was conveyed by using the main axes of the mosque as the main guiding lines in the design to create visual continuity, where the entrances lie on these axes and also most of the vertical circulation elements. The Secondary entrance to the complex is also
axial with the main mosque and central to the plaza and "Sidi Yakout" mosque. The plaza is the main gathering point of the complex it's designed to be viewed as a destination not a pass-by so shading elements and multipurpose use for praying, gathering or even celebrating religious events are provided.

Retail services in the park should be provided in order to avoid unnecessary disorganized kiosks. The plaza is vegetated with tall palms & green elements to act as a visual relief of excessive hardscaping & help in shading. The geometrical shaped courts ventilates and lights the underground level. The shades are of Islamic geometric shapes that give a modern taste with retaining the spiritual feeling of the place and its identity. The addition of water elements in the complex is inevitable to help freshen up the air on site especially in summer days. The urban square is to be turned into an open museum for tourists to understand more about cultural identity. Part of the space will be turned into a multimedia library for the kids in the surrounding community & for the tourists to learn about the place's history. The surrounding buildings should be restored and redesigned to fit in with the renovated theme and to adapt to the modern needs of life. New land-uses could be suggested. Accessibility is an important issue. The entrances should be inviting and easy to find. Clear direct paths that lead into the park and subsequently to the mosques entrances are designed. The site is connected together through the landscape and the hardscape. Due to beauty and age of the already available trees, they should be kept and reserved, or moved to another place on site for sustainable purposes. The fun-fair should not be removed as it is used on weekends and is a destination for families, especially during festivals of Al Morsi Abul Abbas, and the street is turned into a pedestrian street only. Adequate lighting at night is provided, in addition to parking facilities. A committee that includes members of the government and the community should be formed to maintain and manage the plaza. The whole upgrading process should teach the people about sustainability and introduce its principles to them. [16,18]

Activities:

Many activities already take place in the square which include daily prayer traditions, weekly Friday outing and annual festivals. More activities could be recommended by holding different events.

Meaning:

The place already holds a lot of meaning for the people as it has a history and is already a strong focal point in the city. So the main aim is to strengthen the people's sense of place and upgrade the plaza. After the recommendations and design upgrades take place, people will be proud of their square and in turn, sustain it.

8. Conclusion:

The desired urban space should reflect our Arabic urban identity through the physical settings, activities held and meaning. Identity could be expressed either through visual abstraction or conceptual abstraction. This leads to a sustainable urban community that maintains its identity.

9. Recommendations:

- Tradition must be respected but development is the key of our existence. Development and identity could move in parallel.
- Re-inventing identity in local urban spaces in a way that matches modern design principles and sustainability, while maintaining and conserving the local identity, so it is an approach that blends between the traditional and the modern
- Think regionally, systematically and ecologically
- Think in terms of whole systems.
- Holism
• Think sense of place, civic place and think of beauty.
• Cooperation and partnership.

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