Local Identity Regeneration of Unused Urban Spaces

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Abstract: This study attempts to develop a methodology to help discover and evaluate the potential of unused urban spaces at the local level, and put it into practice. Through the application of the method, the conceptual framework of unused urban spaces with physical and functional aspects, across natural and acquired origins of formation, is further confirmed, developed and improved. More importantly, this study aims not only to develop a method of identifying the local unused space and its development potential in practice, but also to provide the capability of assessing the quality and uniqueness of such space.

1. INTRODUCTION

Due to modernisation and globalisation, more and more unused urban spaces, such as bridges, are created as city planners try to meet the functional requirements of the city. There is a large danger of repetitiveness and sameness across our cities. Therefore, understanding and promoting local identity is necessary for successfully recognising the reasons for the character of any place, what our role in it might be, and how we can sustain or change it, especially for unused urban spaces. Researchers have started to pay more attention to local identity, such as the genius of the place (Pope, 1731), the image of the city (Lynch, 1960), city forms (Lynch, 1981), life between buildings (Gehl, 1987), sense of place (Measham, 2006), experiential landscape (Thwaites & Simkins, 2007), and place making and keeping (Markusen & Nicodemus, 2014). A recurring theme in the research is that each place has its own unique qualities; some emphasise physical makeup, others social activities. But how is local identity promoted? And what about the unused spaces? It ought to be the responsibility of the architect or landscape-designer to be sensitive to those unique spaces and their qualities, to enhance them rather than to destroy them.

Despite the growing importance of local identity to the improvement of the quality of human life, the term is rather ambiguously defined, which has caused difficulties in the field of landscape study, where practitioners have not realised the impact of local identity during their working processes. Together with globalisation, this has resulted in the disappearance of a vast amount of local identities over the last decade. The unused urban space shares the same problems: no formal definition and not much attention from practitioners.
The aim of this paper is to respond to these problems by investigating unused urban space and local identity in the context of contemporary Chinese urban development, and develop from this a conceptual framework for application in practice. This is significant because it can help to underpin an understanding of the importance of unused urban places’ local identities in modern urban design processes, resulting in the formation of a better urban environment.

The objectives of this paper are to:
1) Undertake a literature review of unused urban spaces and local identity.
2) Develop a conceptual framework from it to help practitioners gain better knowledge of the term.
3) Carry out interviews in Yantai to investigate implications for the applicability of the conceptual framework and use this to assess the local identity of unused space in Yantai.

The overall aim of the paper is to:
1) Introduce a better understanding of the definitions of unused space and local identity, and their conceptual framework as it relates to urban development.
2) Explain the practicality of the paper’s findings in relation to the local identity of unused urban spaces.

Through this case study, the importance of understanding the local identity of unused urban space is discussed. The resulting conceptual framework has the potential, when further developed, to provide insight into the local identity of unused urban spaces to help urban designers better understand and evaluate them to inform better decision-making practices.

2. UNDERSTAND UNUSED URBAN SPACES

There are two main aspects of the impact of unused urban space on urban planning. On one hand, unused urban space has led to the discussion of density, compactness, expansion and urban structure in the process of urbanisation. It plays a central role in the process of urban expansion and the process of intensive and existing urbanisation. Ebner (1999) suggested that the use of regional percentages to discourage regional vacancy is often inaccurate because such definitions do not have a clear idea of what the “vacancy” is, and because that definition will change according to the purpose of the study, so it would be inaccurate to suggest that the term has a static definition (Ebner, 1999). One of the purposes of this study is, therefore, to redefine unused urban space as a broader concept.

The definitions are usually concerned with the origins of disuse. Where spaces are categorised based on this origin, they are divided into two types: one is because the area has always been left out throughout the city’s development process, and the other is it was previously used but later fell into disuse for unforeseeable reasons. This distinction is important when introducing the terminology; for example, regarding landscape planning issues, the term "unused" usually refers to abandoned landscape terrain and space that has never been developed in any form.

Some of the definitions of unused urban space emphasise the terrain’s emptiness compared to the surrounding built environment, which is neither occupied nor unoccupied by architecture and infrastructure. However, practitioners stress that unused spaces in urban planning are normally spaces that have been abandoned or have no urban activities, such as urban
wasteland, brownfield, desert land, degraded land or buildings. All of these definitions do point to the enormous potential of development of such terrain or architecture.

Going by the most basic concept, the unused urban space is still "land". Ebner (1999) proved that, in fact, the city's unused space is also part of the landscape environment, where it is forced into an idle state by its surrounding building space and urban activities reflected in the space (Ebner, 1999). Although urban wasteland is a product of organic development, it is still a part of the urban spatial formation process. Based on this view, vacancy is a bi-product of urban development.

In addition, the development around unused urban space is concerned with both space and time. Only by examining the historical trajectory of city development can we understand the causes of the formation of unused space. The history of a place reveals the reason why it was vacant or abandoned, and explains why there is no human activity and social production. The origin of a place can be found in the urban planning model, which is based on the use of land in the urban growth model, real estate speculation or industrial demand specifying the use of a specific urban space model.

In addition, the time dimension follows trends in formation and transformation of unused urban space. The 1950s and 1960s brought the growth of abandoned historic centres to achieve urban development. In the next decade, to meet the demand for productivity growth, a lot of urban blank areas were developed in large numbers. In the eighties, the political programs and trends of public and private cooperation turned industrial areas into residential and office spaces. After that, the city's development focused on the strategic return of the city centre, which has continued. The process of revitalisation, re-identification and reconstruction of the city is almost always focused on the development of unused urban spaces and buildings.

In general, this lack of space for human activities does not cause many problems or affect a particular interest. However, when we see them as part of history, such unused space seems to be particularly important. To this end, scholars and practitioners believe that the protection and re-development of unused urban space and the transformation of the city’s future development has played a particularly important role.

It can be seen from the above literature that unused space can be defined as undeveloped areas and areas that are missing functional capabilities. One important fact to note is that this definition is concerned with the surrounding environment, and this relationship changes over time. Regarding the time dimension, these two aspects can then be further divided into ‘natural’ and ‘acquired’ as reasons for formation. At the same time, the physical and functional level of unused space are co-related (Figure1).

As shown above, at the spatial level, when the physical unused space is fully developed, it may lead to a reduction of function within the area, resulting in unused space at the functional level. On the contrary, when a space is left unused to meet more functional requirements, it will face the danger of producing unused space at the physical level. Across time, the two types of unused space become interconnected and often affect each other.
3. LOCAL IDENTITY

The major obstacles when trying to define local identity are the confusion between different levels of identities and other related terms. Therefore it is important to understand the difference between different identities and to clarify the common features between related terms of local identity.

3.1 Different levels of identity

At different physical scales the concept of identity in landscape has been categorised into national, regional, and urban identity, together with ideas of local identity (Dredge & Jenkins, 2003). Christmann (2003) suggested that the different levels of such identities are not only caused by their physical scales, but also by cultural differences. Others have mentioned smaller places that are incorporated within larger scales (Tuan, 1974; Relph, 1976; Low & Altman, 1992).

A country or a nation is commonly recognised as a form of national identity (Lewicka, 2011). Monuments and ceremonies, for example, all contribute meaning to the national identity (Vale, 2008); whereas regional identity focuses more on the interaction between people and their surrounding environment at a smaller scale (Raagmaa, 2002) where narrative and the historical perspective emphasise how the place is represented in people’s minds and memories (Paasi, 2003). Urban identity narrows the scale to a specific city level, such as the city of London: its emphasis is on how local people form their own identity through interaction, which then forms the regional identity (Oktay, Derya, 2002). Finally, local identity acts as a basic principle for all three former identities: it focuses on the interactions between people and the local environment at a very narrative scale, such as at the level of a city street.

3.2 Related Definition of Local Identity

At a local level, certain terms are used that focus on fundamental issues like physical interaction and social experiences, namely Place Identity and Place Attachment (Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983; Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001). These terms refer to aspects that influence personal identity, which concerns people’s feelings about local space that can be affected by both sensory and memory experience (Williams, 1973).

Cultural identity focuses on how people’s memory is influenced by local historical heritage and is related to the memory aspect of personal identity (Oktay, Derya, 2002; Krause, 2001; Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001), and thereby relate to forming communities and constructing community identity.
The goal of local community identity development is to improve both physical appearance and local memories to better match people’s preferences, improving place identity.

In addition, sense of place is concerned with people’s level of satisfaction in a certain place, both from the physical and psychological aspects (Pope, 1731). Similarly, landscape identity is a social and personal construction that differentiates the existential and spatial aspects of spatial uniqueness (Turner, 2006; Haartsen, Groote, & Huigen, 2000). The physical aspect is the existential identity of a space, whereas the spatial identity concerns human psychology, such as human preferences and historical heritage.

Concerning all of the above identities, the major literature consistently mentions the concept of bi-directional interaction between the physical environment and local people’s feelings, specifically that they enhance each other from time to time. This implies that the physical aspect acts as one of the major aspects of local identity. Additionally, the way people distinguish their local places to the outside world through social activities is also the focus of local identity (Zube, 1991; Lynch, 1960; Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001). In addition to local identity’s capacity to provide a unique place with satisfactory functionalities, it can, importantly, provide sensory psychological comfort. Another major benefit from long-dwelling traditional communities is from their physical and spiritual heritages, which are deeply embedded within human memory (Oktay, D, 2005).

Based on the above fact and aiming to provide a formal unified meaning of local identity, this paper proposes the below definition.

Local identity provides features that create a recognisable image of small-scale place and enables its residents to differentiate themselves from others through physical, social, sensory and memory-based perspectives. There are special feelings associated with local identity, created by interactions between people and their surrounding environment and understood through these four perspectives; such feelings include both positive and negative emotions.

### 3.3 Local Identity of Unused Urban Space

After clarifying the definition and theoretical framework of both unused space and local identity, we need to return to the focus of this study, local identity regeneration of unused urban space. This requires that the definition of the two frameworks be combined and their interconnectivity understood.

In the definition of unused urban spaces, the existence of the innate or acquired "vacant" areas, at the physical and functional levels, reflects or strengthens the relationships between local residents and the surrounding environment. Such feelings of the representative image, formed over time during the interaction process, can either be positive or negative.

From the theoretical framework, the unused urban space reflects the local identity in the two dimensions of space and time:

- From the spatial point of view, the unused space influences the four aspects of local identity at the physical and functional levels.
  1) The physical building structure and blank space effectively affects the physical and sensory aspects of local identity.
  2) The gaps in environmental functions affect the social aspect of local identity.
  3) As time goes by, the above two points, together, affect the history of the local place, hence influencing the memory aspect of local identity.
It is apparent that the spatial dimension of unused space focuses mainly on the physical and sensory aspects of local identity.

From a temporal perspective, unused spaces have a certain impact on the physical and sensory aspect of local identity, but most importantly, they affect the local culture and historical elements of local identity across time.

Therefore, in the study of the local identity of unused urban space, and specifically in the analysis of the local status of potential local identities, it should first be determined whether the formation of such space was natural or if it was acquired during the development process, following which the unused space should be evaluated with regard to the dimensions of space and time respectively.

At this point, the definition and composition of unused urban space and local identity are effectively combined and summarised. This definition framework will provide guidance for the development of identification and an assessment methodology. In summary, the method aims to identify the unused urban space based on different processes of formation, through two dimensions and four factors of local identity in order to assess the corresponding spatial space.

In the following, this study proceeds to identify and evaluate the local identity of unused urban space.

4. DATA COLLECTION

The methodology is developed through a case study in Yantai, China. In order to test the validity of the aspects of local identity introduced in the previous sections, the study site must strongly express all of these aspects, and the information must be easily obtainable. Yantai was chosen due to its satisfaction of the above requirements. Yantai is a city located on the southern coast of the Bohai Sea in China’s Shandong province, with a population of 7.02 million and area of 13745.95 km².

It has been proven that using 180˚ horizontal panoramic photographs (A.K.A. PPEI) as a data source for landscape research is an effective and accurate method given the current limitations in other technologies (Shao, Lange, & Thwaites, 2015). Therefore a set of 180˚ local photos was produced and presented to local participants who were asked to make a selection of unique elements.

The photos were taken around areas within the study area using a Nikon Coolpix P510 Digital Camera. The camera was attached to a tripod at eye-level when taking photos; the zoom range was set between 24mm to 1000mm (35mm equivalent focal length) to try to represent a human focal view. The set of photos was produced and shown to 30 local participants at the study site (with direct observation of the study site). They were asked to pick landscape features that they believed were the unique elements at the study site. During the interview process, questions were asked and the conversations were recorded using a digital recording pen for later interpretation.

For sample size, Sandelowski (1995) pointed out that the size should be neither too small to achieve data saturation, nor too large to undertake a deep, case-oriented analysis required for qualitative research. Various methodologists have suggested that between 12 to 30 participants for each interview group is appropriate for qualitative research (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Therefore this study assumed 30 participants as an appropriate final number to complete the interview.
30 panoramic photos of the local environment comprised the photo set; they were printed in colour on A3 paper. At the study site, the photos were presented to 30 local participants and onsite interviews were completed. In each interview, participants were asked to use coloured adhesive dots to mark the elements they liked or disliked on the set of 30 A3 panoramic photos. Their opinions throughout the interview process were recorded via a digital recorder and also noted on the photos for real-time use. The meanings of each colour are given:

- Blue Dot --- Physical Aspect
- Green Dot --- Social Aspect
- Yellow Dot --- Sensory Aspect
- Red Dot --- Memory Aspect

Furthermore, both the positive and negative perspectives of local identity are identified as they both form a representation of the local site. Each participant marked their selections using “+” and “−” to represent positive and negative feelings correspondingly, with a blank space optional for no specific feeling.

In addition, during the onsite PPEI process, participants were asked to point out the “unused” spaces that they thought could be developed or re-developed. As expressed in the last section, because unused spaces are distinguished by their formation processes, participants are encouraged to not only choose the spaces that are physically unused, but also missing functionality. See Figure 2 for a demonstration of the data analysis process.

**Figure 2. Data analysis process**

5. **DATA ANALYSIS**

Based on the elements selected and the reason for their selection, all participants’ opinions are standardised and organised into two assessment tables for interpolation, one for Unused Space Identification and the other for Local Identity Identification and Assessment.

The Unused Space Identification table simply records the spaces that participants think are “unused” and can be further enhanced. The table organises different spaces into four sections based on the reason for their selection. Each of them represents a type of unused space. For example, the
dysfunctional areas are because participants think they can be further developed to better meet their functionality requirement, and the poor landscape quality areas are missing good physical environmental qualities. These spaces are then mapped on to a local map for easy interpretation:

Figure 3. Unused Urban Space Map

For the local identity assessment table, the middle four table columns represent the four aspects of local identity accordingly. Based on the reason for their selection, elements are categorised into corresponding cells in each local identity aspect table. One important fact to note is that one physical element might have existed in multiple aspect columns due to the reason for its selection. As an example, it can be seen that “Binhai Square Ancient Architectural Building Complex” has been selected across all participant groups (No. 1 in Figure 4). In this way, the table provides a comprehensive view across the different preferences that all participants gave on the elements they have selected.

The table’s first two columns are given as pie charts of positive and negative levels. Each pie chart visualises the level of quality of all four aspects of local identity at one location. The colours in the pie chart represent different aspects:
- Blue: Physical Aspect
- Green: Social Aspect
- Yellow: Sensory Aspect
- Red: Memory Aspect

The size of the pie chart is decided by the number of overall selections of the elements at each location, and the proportion of each colour in the pie chart is determined by the number of corresponding preference selections for each aspect. The preferences are cast into ‘like’ and ‘dislike’ options, with ‘like’ meaning the participant prefers the selection and sees it as an important local element, and ‘dislike’ meaning the element has a negative impact on the participants’ feelings and wants it to be either removed or reduced. For example, at the far left side of the overall assessment table, there are 15 likes on “Tiandi Square” (No. 1 Physical) in its physical appearance; 34 likes on “dancing” carried out at the square (No. 1 Social); 13 likes on “night lighting” (No. 1 Social); and 7 likes for “representing the development of the zone” (No. 1 Memory) that are all related to the museum. The count combined forms the overall size of the positive pie chart and corresponding proportion of the colours; the bigger the size or
The more important it is. The same principle follows for the generation of the negative pie charts.

Based on the above table, two corresponding local identity maps were generated, one for positive elements, the other for negative elements.
Because the goal of this study is to find the potential for unused urban spaces, more attention is given to unused spaces and negative local identities. Hence, the negative local identity map (Figure 6) and the unused space (Figure 7) map are put together to help identify the potential for the
unused spaces. In this map, the grey areas are the areas containing negative local identities and the green areas are the spaces that are identified as “unused” urban spaces, regardless of their reason for selection.

6. DISCUSSION

Based on the elements selected and the reason for their selection, all participants’ opinions were standardised and organised into two assessment tables for interpolation, one for Unused Space Identification and the other for Local Identity Identification and Assessment.

The unused space map not only shows the space identified by local participants, but also shows the reason for their selection. All reasons were successfully categorised into four different reasons across two different aspects:

- Physical level: Messy building façade, lack of landscape quality
- Functional level: Messy parking spaces on the road, dysfunctional spaces

These findings are not only visualisations of the unused spaces with their given formation processes, but also prove the framework that was developed in the literature review section, that unused spaces can be either undeveloped areas or areas that are missing functional capabilities.

The pie chart in the overall assessment table has the power to both identify the local identity and show its corresponding assessment. Their total number of selections ranks the identified local identity elements. The total size of the pie chart shows the importance of local elements; it shows the aspects the local elements’ cover at the location, differentiated by colours in the pie chart; the proportion of each colour inside the pie chart represents the importance of each aspect regarding the location. Most importantly, the positive and negative pie charts are mapped to the local map for direct observation of all of the local identity elements and their assessments corresponding.

The final map, which combines both negative local identity and unused spaces, clearly indicates the areas that either have too many negative identities and unused spaces or the places that only have unused spaces with less negative identities. Therefore, when using this map and the unused space map together, the practitioner would have the ability to identify the unused urban spaces and assess their potential to impact local identity.

As an example, the top half of the final map has quite a few overlapping negative identity areas and unused spaces, which are circled with dotted lines. The bottom half of the map has only a few negative identities with a few large-scale unused spaces, which are circled with solid lines. Additionally, it clearly shows that the bottom half does not have many overlapping areas. By comparing this map with the Unused Space Identification map, more information is revealed.

The top half of the map needs further development as the majority of the unused spaces in this section overlap the negative identities and these spaces tend to be more physically related. In the Unused Space Identification map, the top half shows more physically unused spaces, and the local identity assessment table also expresses more negative opinions regarding the physical aspect. This finding further proves the point of the literature review. Therefore if one would like to do more development in this area, they should consider enhancing the current site’s physical appearance and add more elements relevant to other local identity aspects.
The bottom half has more potential to be developed because it rarely has any negative identities or any positive ones, but there are a lot of large-scale unused spaces that are missing both physical and functional capabilities regarding the Unused Space Identification map, especially the long riverside area at the very bottom of the map. Therefore, if one would like to add more to local identity, this part of the city would have great potential. Such a conclusion is made not only because there are no negative identities in this space, but also because the cause of the formation of this space is both physical and functional. Hence, it can be seen that the place has potential for both physical and functional development. The development of such a space has the potential to create new local identity from the physical, social and sensory aspects, and, over time, it will certainly create new culture, history and memory for residents.

In summary, the maps generated in this research have achieved the following results:

1) The Unused Space Identification map clearly shows the location of each “vacant” space and also shows the cause of their formation. The results prove the definition of unused urban spaces.

2) The overall assessment table can be used to interpret the importance of each local identity element, the aspects they represent, and their corresponding positive and negative ranks.

3) The positive and negative local identity maps visualise the location of each of the local identity elements and their importance.

4) The final unused space and negative local identity map has the power to identify unused spaces that have the potential to either enhance current local identity or create new local identities. If used together with the other maps, it provides a flexible combination for different research and practical purposes.

7. LIMITATION

Despite the positive findings and results from the methodology developed in this research, the method is still subject to a number of limitations.

7.1 Selection of one case study

Because of the time frame and geographical issues, this research only used one case study. Although the study site covered satisfies the required perspectives outlined in the intended scope of the study, it does not necessarily represent a model study site. Hence, the methodology is subject to further tests in other spaces. However, as the study site covers aspects of local identity and the qualitative nature of the methodology, this research argues that the method has potential to become a universal method that can be applied across different places. This approach could be further assessed in future research.

7.2 Combination of unused space map and other maps

Due to the nature of this research, only the unused space map and negative local identity maps were combined to explore the potential for unused space for enhancing current or regenerating new local identities.
However, there are still more possibilities regarding the combination of maps and tables. For example, the overall assessment table and positive local identity maps can be used together to investigate further into each individual aspect of local identity and to point out the most influential elements for each aspect, so that one could focus on the protection of such elements in future development. One could also overlap the unused space map onto the positive local identity map to see which local identity has more potential to be enhanced by revamping the unused spaces surrounding it.

8. CONCLUSION

Despite the loss of local identity across the globe, limited investigations and valid solutions have been proposed. This research therefore aimed to contribute a solution to the problem of local identity loss and proposes a valid way to investigate deeper into the principle of the problem through a typical example in Yantai, China. To such extent, the research acts as a starting point to understand the knowledge and findings of unused urban spaces and local identity; it fills a gap in the research on local identity of unused urban spaces by proposing a definition and investigation framework for the terminology.

The research also attempts to investigate the distinctive features, strengths and shortfalls of unused urban spaces and local identity by making use of visualisation techniques. The findings may not only contribute to the general solutions of loss of local identities, but also help to enhance the living environment to make people feel more attached to these spaces. Urban practitioners could use the thesis findings and methodology to assess their target location’s local identities and unused spaces before they carry out their projects or design, hence improving their work’s quality and enhancing the impact to local sites and people by helping to find the spaces that are worth revamping, and the ones that are worth protecting, as well as ultimately improving people’s attachment to their local environment.

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