Symbolic Landscapes and Their Spatial Components: Understanding the Environmental Design Vocabulary of Place Identity

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Abstract

One of the most concrete problems created by the forces of globalization is identity loss, which is becoming increasingly widespread. In this context, urban governments often expect environmental designers and planners to create open spaces characteristic of the city and define their own identity values. This situation increases the importance of questions such as how landscape architects relate spatial components and identity features in a design, what kind of design vocabulary is adopted in open space design in terms of place identity. In this research, conducted with 165 senior landscape architecture students in different years, participants were asked to define the spatial components if they were to design a symbolic space in an urban park in Trabzon city. Categorization of the spatial components revealed that monumental components were depicted and most frequently used to make connections with an identity feature. Students used a variety of features such as form, color, material and patterns connected to city's cultural, social, natural and historical attributes. However, some students' design suggestions revealed the need to enhance their level of information and experiences in terms of aesthetic/perceptual dimension with extra practices because their suggestions had elements of kitsch.

Introduction

Identity is seen as a fundamental need that encompasses all aspects of human life[1] in an age of increased loss of identity, as our lives and places lose their distinctiveness. In contemporary times, the need for stability is crucial for humans, who require development of emotional bonds with places. Therefore, people's relations with places have been explored using a wide array of psychological constructs such as place identity[2], place attachment[3,4], and sense of place[5,6]. This study focuses on place identity in terms of landscape

architecture and tries to gain insight into how it is understood and reflected by students of landscape design. This is done through analyzing components of a symbolic landscape.

Place Identity; Different Dimensions and Components

The widely accepted definition of place identity in environmental psychology explains it as "ideas, feelings, attitudes, values, preferences, meanings, and conceptions of behavior and experience which relate to the variety and complexity of physical settings that define the day-to-day existence of every human being"[2]. From this point of view, place identity is a result of the interaction of the self and components of the environment, and the actions and interactions that take place there, a psychological structure that arises from the individuals' attempts to regulate their environments[7]. In other words, it refers to the personal meanings, symbols, and significance that places have for their residents, visitors, and users[1]. Relph[8] defines place identity as: "The identity of something refers to a persistent sameness and unity which allows that thing to be differentiated from others. [...] the identity of place simply as that which provides its individuality or distinction from other places and serves as the basis for its recognition as a separable entity." Similarly Lewicka[9] refers to sameness (continuity) and distinctiveness (uniqueness) dimensions of place identity. According to Relph[8], the static physical setting, the activities, and the meanings are the three fundamental components of the identity of places. They are irreducible to the other, yet are inseparably interwoven in our experiences of places.

In the rapidly changing world, the landscapes with which people interact (either at a concrete or at a cultural/abstract level) are undergoing constant change. These changes can strongly affect people's identity10. Golicnik Marušic and Nikšic[11] state that when identity by design is in question, everyday practice shows that approaches are partial and do not address multi-layered aspects. Therefore, this study aims to understand the relationship between landscape design and place identity and the role that landscape architects play in the landscape design process.

Place Identity in Environmental Design

In place making, designers and planners draw on their knowledge of a place to make changes so that the experience of place is strengthened and positively supported. Adam[12] emphasizes the responsibility of environmental designers to transform and create the built symbols that contribute to the identity of people and communities. Place identity can be affected by the physical or spatial features of a setting (e.g., structure, spatial characteristics, built form, landscape, and furniture). But activities carried out in a particular place (circulation flow, behavior patterns), and its meaning (legibility, cultural associations, and semiotics) affect its identity. In consequence, how place identity is perceived and understood is strongly influenced by the interaction between people and these fundamental elements of the environment. Material things such as monuments, streets, neighborhoods, buildings, churches, and parks are all components of this interaction that also evoke specific kinds of meanings and serve as spatial coordinates of identity[13]. In other words, people produce places, and yet they derive identities from them[14].

It was stated that some environmental physical factors can act as facilitators of the subject's identification with the space, and of an external perception of such a space as fostering a strong identity[15]. Depending on the design's function in support of the identity of groups, Lang[16] highlights the responsibilities of designers as they recognize the group's symbols of identity and how they may be used or transformed to continue to provide that support. Padua[17] criticizes the post-traditional landscapes of many contemporary cities as being characterized by symbolic references that create a discontinuity with the local history. Creating place identity has emerged as a solution to the effects of modern societies. Consequently, this field has largely influenced designers and seeks to connect people with their environment and to increase their sense of attachment and belonging in architectural spaces[18]. For modernist environmental design, two techniques for identity that relate a place to its locality are defined: the spirit of place or site-specific design; and symbolic identity or the designer's personal discovery of local symbolism. Choosing

a symbolic identity is defined by Adam[12] as the choice of a symbolic aspect of either a design that seems to be in some way relevant to the location or of local elements that can be interpreted into a new spatial component. Lang[16] defines one of the prime functions of the built environment as being symbolic. According to him, symbols serve many functions but two are primary: providing a sense of identity, and they enhancing self-esteem and affiliation[16]. Therefore, designing the symbolism of the environment is generally associated with meeting people's needs; failure to establish symbols that reflect identity will make people uneasy[16]. In short, symbolism is an important means for creating place identity and, by this way, closely relates to human needs that contribute to well-being.

The design of public space, according to Padua[17], is one of the places where symbols of collective identity can be seen in their most clear and compelling form. The symbolic references that provide a design vocabulary for these open spaces speak volumes about the shared values of the group and have often been developed to reinforce peoples' identification[14,17]. Such places include landscapes, monuments, and sites where commemorations are performed, collective memory is reinforced, and national identity is constructed, both formally and informally. Similarly, Bender[19] defines landscape as a part of the way in which identities are created and disputed. In her study, Padua[17] showed the role and responsibilities of landscape architects in shaping and reflecting the cultural values of a community and revealed the importance of supporting place identity through the design process.

In this study, spatial components (physical space) of a symbolic landscape and how they are related to place identity were examined. The spatial components such as monuments, seating, and pavement and how they are defined related to traditional/local values constitute the design vocabulary. Learning this vocabulary can offer deep insight into how designers understand place identity and enhance design decisions before implementation of projects. The aims of this study were to determine which spatial components are seen as to have symbolic value and are most frequently used and to observe how student designers use these components to make connections between identity and the construction of a symbolic landscape.

Methodology

The research was conducted at Karadeniz Technical University's Landscape Architecture Department with 165 senior students in different years of schooling. Previous to the research, students were informed about symbolic space, and how it relates to place identity and enhances basic human needs like affiliation and self-esteem[16]. Different examples of landscape designs with symbolic spaces were shown and how they used symbolism to refer to an identity or a social value is discussed with students in the Spatial Behavior course. At the end of the term students were asked to define their design concepts, the type of space, activity patterns that will take place and the spatial components of the space if they were to design a symbolic space in an urban park in Trabzon city. The question was asked as part of final exam of Spatial Behavior course which is obligatory and 25 (over 100) points were appointed to this question. Answers were coded and then categorized by 3 landscape architects who work as a researcher with Ph.D. degree in the field of landscape design and environmental psychology. The frequencies of spatial components, how they are being categorized and related with identity symbols were analyzed and the relationships between them were investigated.

Results
Respondents

Table 1 shows the frequencies of students according to their gender, locality and the year of the research. Of the answers from 165 students, 138 were analyzed; 27 students did not answer the question or mentioned another city, not Trabzon.

Table 1: Respondents' socio-demographic data

Demographic Data	N=138	Frequency (%)
Gender		
Female	94	68,1
Male	44	39,1
Locality		
Local	42	30,4
Non-local	96	69,6
Year of research		
2017	45	32,6
2014	40	29
2010	53	38,4

Frequencies and Categorization of Spatial Components

The spatial components were first analyzed without any categorization in order to determine the most common ones. A component was identified in answers 326 times. In total, 100 different kinds of components were mentioned. The answers revealed a rich variety in terms of both type of components and their features. The most frequent answers were: seating with 11.3%; monument/murals depicting anchovy themes with 6.4%; a monument/statue/mural or emblem of Trabzonspor football team's logo, TS, with 6.1%; a water element with 5.2%; an exhibit/information panels, boards with 4.9%; monuments or statues depicting figures of folk dance players with 4.6%; a statue/monument with 4%; a shopping stall, stands with 3.7%; and monuments or statues depicting kamancha (a kemençe-traditional folk music instrument) with 3.7%. Other answers included components such as a statue of Suleiman the Magnificent or Atatürk, lighting, red and blue pavement (the colors of Trabzonspor football team), hazelnut trees (which provide one of the major means of living in the region), screen/cinevision, and plant types specific to Trabzon. The chi-square test showed that the frequencies were significant. In other words, the answers revealed that some spatial components are seen as more related to local identity (χ^2=858,356; 98 df, p<0,01).

In the second phase of analyzing spatial components, the components were categorized according to type of component or the equipment they refer to. In all, 12 groups of spatial components were determined. The most frequently emphasized components were monumental types such as monuments, statues, murals or wall paintings. The second group of components were seating, followed by moveable equipment (χ^2=491,914; 11 df, p<0,01) (Table 2).

Table 2: Spatial component types and frequencies

Spatial components	Frequency	Percent
Monument/statue/mural/wall painting	125	38,3
Seating	53	16,3
Moveable components	39	12,0
Pavement	33	10,1
Plant	25	7,7
Water	19	5,8
Lighting	7	2,1
Architectural components	7	2,1
Pergola/shelter	7	2,1
Blue & red colour	5	1,5
Flag	3	,9
Children play ground components	3	,9
Total	326	100,0

Components Related To Identity and Their Features

In order to understand what components the student designers defined and how they related these components to identity, the components were classified into two groups: one with an identity and one without. Any component mentioned in answers that used an adjective or name related to a city or student's own design concept was categorized as "with an identity"; if the component was mentioned in answers solely, it was categorized as "without an identity". For example, while the answer "monument" was categorized as without an identity, the answer "monument depicting *horon* (folk dance) dancers" was categorized as with an identity. In this way, by focusing on the relationship the designers made with colors, materials, shapes or patterns, it was possible to define the design vocabulary used for creating identity in landscape design. In this context, the conducted analysis revealed that 59.8% of the suggested components were "with an identity" and 40.2% of them were "without an identity"

(χ^2=12,564; 1 df, p<0,01) (Table 3). This result indicates that when design of a symbolic space was at stake, students tried to connect spatial components of a suggested space to the values of the city and society where the space was located. Figures of anchovy, kamancha (kemençe), horon dancers and figures of important people in the history of the city and nation were emphasized; materials that belong to local architecture and traditional crafts such as wood, copper and Trabzon stone, colors such as colors of city's football team Trabzonspor--red and blue--or warm colors that symbolically reflect the friendly character of local people (suggested by students as a design concept in answers) were emphasized frequently.

Table 3: the percentages of the spatial components with and without identity

Spatial Component	Identity		Total
	Yes	**No**	
Monument/statue/mural	32,8%	5,5%	38,3%
Pavement	8,3%	1,8%	10,1%
Tree/plants	5,2%	2,5%	7,7%
Seating	4,6%	11,7%	16,3%
Moveble equipments (stalls, stands, boards)	2,1%	9,8%	12,0%
Pergola/shelter	1,8%	,3%	2,1%
Blue&red clour	1,5%	,0%	1,5%
Architectural elements (local structures like serander or Turkish houses and other elements like tower)	1,5%	,6%	2,1%
Flag	,9%	,0%	,9%
Children play ground equipments	,9%	,0%	,9%
Water	,0%	5,8%	5,8%
Lighting	,0%	2,1%	2,1%
Total	**59,8%**	**40,2%**	**100,0%**

Which components were related to an identity feature or if there are any differences between them were also examined. Overlapping components and identity factors and the distribution of these were examined with crosstab analyze (χ^2=140,694; 11 df, p<0,01) (table 3). This finding reflects the fact that students can relate some components more easily with identity than other components. The components most frequently related to an identity feature were monument/statue/mural, pavement and plants. Monument/statue/mural group included social, natural, historical and cultural features such as kamancha, anchovy, horon dancers, Suleiman the Magnificent, Mehmet the Conqueror, Atatürk, famous football players, the Black Sea, and Trabzonspor football team's logo. The pavement group included the colors blue and red or warm colors, formal approaches like angular lines (reflecting petulant character of local people), circular lines (reflecting horon dance), and figures of anchovy, kamancha or traditional patterns. The plant group included plant types specific to region such as cherry laurel, hazelnut, camellia (tea) or plant types related to Turkish culture such as plane trees, cypress trees or tulips. The identity relationships included in other component groups were similar to those with the pavement or monument groups.

Discussion
In this study, how place identity relates to spatial components is considered through symbolic landscape design. In the context of Trabzon city the design vocabulary of students was determined. Symbolic landscape was chosen as a device for analyzing identity markers since, as with all identity, place identity relies on shared symbolic markers. Any attempt to deny or remove these symbols will be a challenge to the identity of those who use them as identity markers[12]. Therefore, designers' awareness of their responsibilities in terms of place identity and

responsiveness of their designs in this context are crucial for the quality of open space, and thus the life quality of users.

Analyses have revealed that the most frequently spoken spatial components are monumental features such as a monument, statue or mural. Since monuments focus attention on specific places and events, Osborne[14] defines monuments as spatial and temporal landmarks loaded with memory and as central to the endeavor of constructing symbolic landscapes. A variety of features that are typical of Trabzon were incorporated into the monuments. Through the use of monuments or statues, students transformed local (natural, cultural, historical, and social) features into symbolic landmarks and tried to nurture a sense of identity through the locality in the users, by making the values of the city visibly dominant. The locality is expressed in the monumental components by form and scale. In seating and moveable equipment, locality is expressed mainly by local materials (wood, Trabzon stone, copper) and colors (colors of Trabzonspor football team), also formal similarities were used again (e.g., seating in the shape of a kamancha, or hazelnut). While the students' endeavors for creating identity mainly were based on monumental and pavement components, in the seating and moveable components groups the number of components without an identity feature was more common than components with an identity feature. The result shows that students aim and regard bigger components in terms of scale or area while trying to create an identity.

Finally, the plants were also accepted as an important component of identity. Frequently mentioned as a spatial components were hazelnuts, which provide a major means of living in the region, and plant types specific to Trabzon such as cherry laurel and rhododendrons. Apart from these, important components of Turkish historical gardens such as plane and cypress trees and tulips were also suggested for planting design.

While making suggestions, students sometimes tended to neglect aesthetic dimension and lack awareness about aesthetics. Some of the suggestions (such as hazelnut, kamancha, anchovy shaped seating or shelter) were found to be aesthetically inappropriate for urban open spaces and considered to create a kitsch effect.

Conclusion

The results reveal the importance given to traditional identity or social values and how they are seen as related to symbolism by students. The design vocabulary of students draws on a set of symbols linked to the city's most known features. In other words, the features that students tend to cite in their suggestions are references and symbols used to represent elements rooted in local history and in the daily life and experience of the local population. However, students' tendency to avoid abstraction while designing for identity and the lack of aesthetic concerns in their suggestions would produce kitsch effects. Therefore, there is a need to enhance their awareness. Students' level of awareness can be enhanced with appropriate courses and content in studio courses centered around spatial behavior, open space equipment design or special design practices. Including subjects and practices towards this aim in the curriculum will result in more accurate decisions.

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