Local Identity Regeneration of Public Spaces

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Abstract:
This study attempts to develop a methodology to help discover and evaluate the potential of Public Spaces from the local level and put it into practice. The study is aiming to not only develop a way to identify the local identity of public space and development potential of such space in practice, but also to provide ability to assess the quality and uniqueness of such space. The paper first clarify the definition of local identity via literature review, and then applies the panoramic photo elicitation interview (PPEI) technique to a case study in Yantai (China) to investigate ways of identifying and assessing local identity. As a result, an efficient data analysis approach with data visualization technique is developed and proposed to investigate local identity effectively. Certain benefits and obstacles in both local identity and thesis method are also discussed to investigate potential opportunities in the future. Furthermore, the meanings of research are addressed from different perspectives in order to explore the importance of such findings in both academic and practical use.

Introduction:
Public spaces are the primary space for public interaction and activity in our cities. There are opportunities to improve the quality of such places. Therefore it is always a challenging aspiration to the landscape practitioners to create a user-friendly public space. To be able to achieve such aim, all users should be encouraged to make their contribution; those who live, work and visit the place. Hence, thinking afresh about our public spaces is needed, how it is used and how people move within the space. However, Due to modernization and globalization, more and more public spaces are facing danger of repetitiveness and sameness taking place in our cities. Therefore understanding and promoting of local identity of public spaces is necessary to successfully help us get a handle on why the particular place is like it is, what our role in it might be, and how we can sustain or change it.

Local identity plays an important role in improving and maintaining the quality of urban environments and enhancing the quality of human life. However, there are confusion and ambiguity to the various terms defining local identity and this confusion has always been an issue in the realm of landscape study. Due to this lack of clarity, practitioners have not realised the importance of local identity during their developing process. And because of globalization, such phenomenon has caused a vast amount of local identities to vanish in the last 10 years.

In the urban development process, identity is the key to a subjective reality and all subjective realities are in a dialectic relation with the society (Christmann, 2003). It has been recognised as an important factor with which a city or region can build, modify or reshape a close relationship with their citizens and businesses through pride. Selman and Swanwick (2010) have suggested the importance of realising
landscape uniqueness in modern landscape development processes to increase ties between residents and the environment. To identify the identities that are recognised by the citizen can help practitioners to improve the image of the place towards the desired quality, and therefore distinguish the city from other towns and regions in the global competition, which will enhance citizens’ sense of belonging and attract skilled people and investments. However, due to the dynamic characteristics of the identity, it has not been defined precisely.

With globalisation, more academics and practitioners have realised the loss of distinctive urban identities and started to focus on smaller scale identities that would benefit the local citizens --- Local Identity. For example, Thwaites (2007) discussed the idea of improving urban sustainability by focusing on the development of small-scale community characteristics. However, there has not been a solid definition for local identity; the term is vaguely defined, and due to the diversification of all the literature on different aspects of identity, it is currently very hard for both academics and practitioners to identify the correct identity that they can focus on when developing urban places.

Hence, this paper is set to establish a formal definition of the term Local Identity and develop an efficient methodology to identify and assess such place and local identities. This can help to underpin an understanding of the importance of local identity of public spaces in modern urban design processes and to help protect such identities to form a better urban environment.

**Local Identity:**

One of the major difficulties in defining local identity is the different level of identities that have been developed in landscape studies. Such different levels of identities have caused confusion between each other. Concepts of national identity, regional identity, urban identity and ideas of local identity have been introduced with their different physical site scale (Dredge and Jenkins, 2003). Christmann (2003) introduced the different levels and identities and testified their unique focuses based on different physical scale and cultural differences. Some also mentioned smaller places that are incorporated within larger scales (Altman and Low, 1992, Relph, 1976, Tuan, 1974).

However, the boundaries between these different levels of identities are not clearly clarified; therefore it is important to separate out these different levels first to distinguish local identity from a fundamental perspective.

**Different levels of identity:**

Concepts of national identity, regional identity, urban identity and ideas of local identity have been introduced with their different physical site scale (Dredge and Jenkins, 2003). Christmann (2003) introduced different levels and identities, and testified their unique focuses based on different physical scale and cultural differences. Some also mentioned smaller places that are incorporated within larger scales (Altman and Low, 1992, Relph, 1976, Tuan, 1974).

National identity is commonly recognised as a country or a nation (Lewicka, 2011). It can take many forms, which all contribute meaningful symbols to the national
identity, monument and ceremonies for example (Vale, 2008). Whereas the regional identity focuses more on how people interact with their environment from a smaller scale compared to a country and people’s lives in the same region tend to share a similar language and religion, a province for example (Raagmaa, 2002). From a historical point of view, regional identity focuses on a more narrative range of people compared with national identity. It is a ‘mental’ reflection of the space in people’s minds and memories (Paasi, 2003). The urban identity narrows the area down to a more specific city level. E.g., the city of Sheffield. Urban identity focuses more on how local people interact and therefore forms its own identity, which then forms the regional identity (Oktay, 2002). Finally, local identity acts as a basic principle for all three former identities. It focuses on people who participate in a very narrative scale of area, e.g. a neighbourhood in a city. It focuses on how people interact with the local environment.

![Figure 1 Different Level of Identity](image)

**Related Definition of Local Identity:**

At a local level, Place Identity/Attachment is the identity that focuses on more fundamental issues, such as physical interaction, social experiences, residents’ feelings of satisfaction and historical heritage (Proshansky, 1978, Jorgensen and Stedman, 2006). With these aspects together, they influence personal identity, which emphasises how people “feel” about the local area, and can be affected by both sensory and memory aspects of experience (Williams, 1973).

Cultural identity focuses on the historical heritage effect of the local area in people’s memory. It has an interaction with the memory aspect of personal identity (Krause 2001, Hidalgo and Hernandez, 2001, Oktay, 2005). Together with personal identity, they would help to form a “community” and constructs community identity (Thompson and Travlou, 2007). During the process of the evolution of community identity, physical and memory will be improved to better satisfy people’s preference, thus, improving place identity.
Besides, sense of place is a measure of both the physical and psychological comfort of people at a certain place (Altman and Low, 1992). Similarly, Landscape identity is a social and personal construction that distinguishes the uniqueness into existential and spatial aspects (Haartsen et al., 2000, Turner, 2006). Its existential identity focuses on the physical aspect, and its spatial identity focus on interaction, human preference, and historical heritage with emphasis on the psychological side of human feeling.

Based on the common factors of above relevant identities, local identity can be summarised as a distinct, recognisable and consistent pattern of elements in the small-scaled place, e.g. a city street that is distinguishable from another. Each different identity is inter-related with another, and together, they form a systematic circulation that explains the entire structure of local identity as shown in below Figure.

![Figure 2 connections between different identities](image)

In all of the relative identities, major literatures have all mentioned the concept of how the physical environment influences local people’s feelings. Therefore it is supported that the physical aspect is one of the major aspects in local identity. Besides local identity also focuses on how people contribute to the environment to make the place more attractive and distinguished to the outside world. From this perspective social activity is important in which local people interact with their place to make it unique (Lynch, 1960, Hidalgo and Hernandez, 2001, Zube, 1991). As users are a key attribute of urban places, local identity is not only about the uniqueness of the physical place and its functionality, but also the ability to provide psychological comfort – Sensory. An important part of an area is its inheritance from its past, which is a benefit of a traditional community having long dwelt there (Oktay, 2005). These are usually expressed through physical and spiritual heritage, which are deeply embedded with human memory.

Based on the above fact, as a formal way to define and unify the meaning of local identity, the essay proposes the below definition.
Local identity provides features that create a recognisable image of small-scale place and its residents to differentiate from others through physical, social, sensory and memory perspectives. It provides special feelings through the four perspectives’ interactions between people and surrounding environment; such feelings include both be positive and negative emotions.

Data Collection:

In order to develop the methodology, a case study was carried out in Yantai, China. The research has chosen Yantai to be the primary research site due to its combined features of rich history, varied architecture, mixed community life and diverse population format. Because the ultimate goal of the case study is to test the validity of local identity aspects identified in previous sections, therefore the chosen site needs to have a strong representation in all the major local identity aspects; and most importantly it is relatively easy for the researcher to obtain information. Yantai is a famous seaside city located in north-east China with a population of 7.02 million, it is a prefecture-level city with scale of 13745.95 km² located on the southern coast of the Bohai Sea at Shandong Province in China. It has 909 km coastline bordered by both the Yellow Sea and the Bohai Sea, and lies across from South Korea and Japan. It is now the largest fishing seaport and a robust economic center in Shandong province.

It has been proven that using 180˚ horizontal panoramic photographs (A.K.A. PPEI) in landscape research’s data gathering process is an effective and accurate method given the currently limitation in other technologies. (Shao, et al, 2015). Hence this paper has chosen to use a set of 180˚ of local sites to extract information from local participants to see the unique elements that they have selected.

The photos were taken around areas within the study area using a Nikon Coolpix P510 Digital Camera, which is attached to a tripod at eye level, with zoom range from 24mm to 1000mm (35mm equivalent focal length). The set of photos were taken and shown to 30 local participants at the study site (with direct observation of the study site) to pick landscape features, using circles, which are the elements they think are unique at the study site. Questions are used in the interview and the conversations are recorded using a digital recording pen to further investigate participants’ opinions on their selections.

In terms of sample size, Sandelowski (1995) suggested that sample size in qualitative research should be neither so small as to make it difficult to achieve data saturation, nor too large to undertake a deep, case-oriented analysis. Various methodologists have provided guidelines for selecting samples in qualitative studies based on the research design (e.g. case study, interview). Among all it has been suggested that between 12 to 20 participants for one interview group is an appropriate size (Guest et al., 2006). Therefore the research has decided to select 30 participants at the study site and completed the interview.

In total, there are 30 panoramic photos to represent the local environment printed in color on A3 paper for participants to use during the PPEI process. The photos are presented to 30 local participants at the study site and completed the onsite interview.
In each interview, participants were shown a set of 30 A3 panoramic photos and asked to use different colored adhesive dots to mark the elements they like or dislike, and their opinions throughout the interview process were recorded and noted on the photos, the entire interview conversation was also digitally recorded for later analysis; the entire interview conversation was also digitally recorded for later analysis. Each color represents one aspect of local identity:

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

Furthermore, it is not only the positive perspectives that are cast as local identity, but also the negative ones. Hence, each participant was asked to mark their selections by “+” and “-” to represent their positive and negative feelings correspondingly, empty for no specific feeling.

![Figure 3 Sample PPEI photos](image)

**Data Analysis:**

Based on the elements selected and the reason of selection, all participants’ opinions are standardized and organized into Local Identity assessment table for interpolation.

For the local identity assessment table, the middle four table columns represent the four aspects of local identity accordingly. And based on the reason of their selection,
elements are categorized 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. In such way, the table provides a comprehensive view across the different preferences that all participants have on the same elements they have selected.

The table’s first two columns are divided into positive and negative pie chart columns. The aim is to visualise the quality assessment for four local identity aspects that are related to one physical location. Each pie chart represents an overall preference across four aspects in relation to one physical location. Each color in the pie chart represents one aspect:

- 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 in the same location, and the proportion of each color in the pie chart is determined by the number of corresponding preference selections in each aspect. For example, at the far left side of overall assessment table, there are 31 “Like” on Zhangyu Wine Cultural Museum” in its physical appearance; 34 “Like” on “Wine Annual Expo” carried out at the museum; 27 “Like” on “Wine Tasting”; and 62 “Like” from three memory related elements (named “Zhang Bishi”, “Zhangyu Ltd”, “Sun Zhongshan Inscribe: 品重醴泉”) that are all related to the museum. Hence, explaining the size of the positive pie chart and proportion of each color in the chart that related to the local identities at the location: Zhangyu Wine Cultural Museum. The negative pie charts generated in the same way.
A bigger sized pie chart indicates that more participants viewed such location as unique elements that could represent local identity, regardless of which aspects it emphasized on, hence, providing a direct and precise observation for the importance of all local identity elements.

Bases on the above table, two corresponding local identity maps are generated, one for positive elements, the other for negative elements.
The overall assessment table has the power to do both local identity identification and show its corresponding assessment via the pie charts. The table ranks all identified local identity elements via their number of selections. The pie chart has the ability to indicate multiple findings. It indicates the importance of the local elements by the total size; tell how many aspects the local elements cover via the color involved in the pie chart; present the importance of each aspect at one location via the size of each color proportion in the pie chart. Most importantly these pie charts are plotted on a local map to provide a direct view on the location of each local identity and their corresponding assessment.

From the positive local identity map it can be clearly seen which elements most strongly represent the local identity from the size of each pie chart on the map --- the bigger the more important. And from the proportion of different colors in each pie
chart, one could identify the aspect the elements have emphasised on. Therefore, the maps provide a direct and visualised way for its users to both identify and assess corresponding local identities. Same idea applies to the negative local identity table.

The final maps has a good indication on the areas that has too many negative identities, or the places that does not have any identities. Therefore when using this map, practitioners would have the ability to identify the unused urban spaces and the spaces that have negative identities, they would able to assess its potential on which aspect should such space have on local identity.

**Discussion:**

This research has resulted in two sets of findings which are related to each other; the first is the conceptual framework of local identity developed through literature review, the second used that framework to develop a methodology on both data collection and analysis process that generates and analyses data to further prove the properties of local identity as defined. In this way, the results from the methodology have provided a rigorous and easy access to investigate local identity through both individual aspects and overall perspective, which can be used to refine local identity development.

An important contribution from the thesis methodology is its data analysis process. The final results that are derived by the thesis methodology are: Local Identity Assessment Table; final mapping for both positive and negative local identity elements (via pie charts). In these maps, the representation elements of local identity and its relative preferences are all explicitly expressed and the overall assessment table provides details of local identity elements. The derivation process followed a specific procedure, which not only quantifies but also visualise information gathered. Through the method of data analysis process, all data collected can be categorised into four different aspects, this has further proven the validity of conceptual framework of local identity.

In summary, the research generated maps has achieved following perspectives:

- The overall assessment table can be used to interpret the importance of each local identity elements, the aspects they represent, and their corresponding positive and negative ranks.
- The positive and negative local identity maps visualized the location of each local identity elements and their importance.
- The assessment table and local identity maps together, has the power to identify spaces that have potential to either enhance current local identity or create new local identities. They provides a flexible combination for different research / practical purposes.

**Limitation:**

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

**Selection of one case study:**

Due to the time and geographical limitations, the research only focused on one case study. Despite the site chosen having a combination of all perspectives, it cannot be viewed as a place that has the ability to represent all the other places. The validity of the methodology at
other places was not tested. However, due to the qualitative nature of the method, and the full coverage of all aspects of local identity the study site has, this research argues that the methodology has the potential to become a universal method which can be applied to other places. Such a view could be a potential work for future research.

**Evaluation with specific local identity aspects:**

The Final map was used for assessing the study area as a whole, however, it still has the power to assess the specific local identity aspects. E.g. one could only take the physical columns in the final assessment table to assess the physical identities of the study site. This would allow practitioner to have more focused view on the study site. Due to the time scale of this paper, such work are left for future interpretation.

**Evaluate local identity in different time of the day or season:**

The research was carried out at the study site in day light under summer condition. However, local identities might change throughout time, e.g. the site might show different identities in daytime and night time, or different in seasons. Therefore the validity of the research method in different environmental condition was not testified. However, it is believed that the research method is practical enough to evaluate such identities if there are any differences.

**Conclusion:**

The claim for local identity is that it is an effective indication by which to engage various aspects’ elements to provide distinguishable uniqueness of a local site and increase the bond between places and people. Therefore the major objective of this research is to help both academics and practitioners to understand, identify and assess local identity, hence achieving the ultimate goal to making a better place environment. In essence, the theory needs to be well organised and clarified to aid the understanding of local identity whilst the method needs to be practically viable and able to be uniformly applied on different local sites. The theory of local identity has been clarified and reorganised into a new conceptual framework; the methodology has been developed as a four-step process to find and reflect such framework: taking panoramic photos; choosing participant groups; carrying out the PPEI and data analysis process. The data analysis process is especially meaningful, as it not only provides a way to visually analyse all data, but also provide more details of local identity theories. Hence when practitioners are willing to use such method, it can be applied effectivity to investigate and assess the nature of local identities and reveal potential beneficial practices that could be used to enhance the bond between the local environment and people.

However, there is still plenty of potential work that could be done in both literature and practical methods, based on the findings of this research to improve the understandings and use of local identity:

- For Academics:
  With the clear conceptual framework of Local identity, each individual aspect could be studies into more detail to offer more effective influence according to the local site; one could potentially apply the research methodology to multiple case studies and compare their results, it will interesting to see the cross-culture effectiveness of the local identity.
• For Practitioners:
  More advanced technology could be used, such as GIS, Visual Reality etc, to see if they would offer a better data collection results given the cost is within research budget; one could also try to increase the sample sized to see if it offer a much different results.

In spite of the global issue of the loss of local identity, there has been little investigation into the problem or proposed valid solutions. The research perspectives were addressed in regard to delivering a valid way to contribute to the problem of losing local identity via a typical example site in Yantai, China. In such respect, the paper has laid a foundation to understand the knowledge and finding of local identity, which has taken a step forward in filling in the blanks on local identity by proposing a formal definition and framework of local identity. The research has also used visualised comparative analysis to reflect on distinctive features, strengths and shortfalls of different local identity aspects. Throughout the thesis development, the research believes the findings can contribute to the solution of resolving the current identity loss of cities globally and help to deliver a better living environment that people feel more attached to. For example: before urban developers / designers carry out projects on the local site, one could use the thesis findings and methodology to identify and pre-assess the site’s local identities to find out whether their project is going to strengthen or harm existing local identities, hence protecting local identities while improving people’s attachment to the local environment.

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