

Focus on lived spaces and Identity: the Paradigm of the urban design with residential high-rises in England

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Abstract

Residential high-rises find more and more often their place in central parts of the big British cities. Due to intrinsic characteristics of the typology, they are bound to be observed, evaluated and discussed. Therefore the purpose of this research is through observation of nine prominent high-rise buildings in Manchester, Birmingham and London, subjected to rigorous analysis, to evaluate their ability to maintain identity and to be decisive part of the lived spaces around them. The research achieves this goal through four research questions: how is the design addressing the creation of strong identity of the researched buildings; are the identity-creating features of the design contradicting major placemaking principles; what characteristics have the lived spaces around the residential high-rises; what messages send the design of the lived spaces? The methodology relies on observational survey of the researched areas with the help of structured questions, to evaluate the external qualities of the residential high-rises and their surroundings. Visual information can construct the basis to identify the shortcomings and the downsides of the examined project examples. It can provide insight on how can be improved imageability, legibility and the sense of place. In this connection, the results show that even though it was found that the high-rises with their abstract form, memorable design and creative use of materials and architectural techniques maintain strong identity, the functional quality of the lived spaces around them is low, there are missing squares, gardens and playgrounds in close proximity and the only experience provided for the users is street life, which however exciting is too limited to only few activities such as eating, drinking, shopping or just walking and looking at limited typology of spaces. The implications of this research are that the British planners will address these problems and future projects will have better placemaking component.

Key words: British architecture, identity, high-rise, placemaking

1. Introduction

Global universalization and internationalisation place the challenge in front the architectural practice to create meaningful places and tall buildings with strong identity that fit into their context. It is common to see contemporary high-rises that disrupt their surroundings and have little respect for decades of traditional architecture. The pace with which England embraces the high-rise construction raises the question if it is possible to create new tall buildings that take an active part into the placemaking process and introduce quality and new meaning into their locus, without compromising their identity and the identity of the context. From an artistic point of view, it is not defensible to simply implement traditional form for

the sake of preserve identity since poorly executed traditionally styled building is a failure for the tradition and our senses. The designers need to understand how to respect, preserve, and reuse the old to create new communities that are lively and diverse. Architecture should enhance the surroundings by embracing and respect local design considerations, cultural themes and materials, and be in harmony with the local environment (Zhang, 2008). To design vertical offers as many opportunities as threads, but there is no doubt that the high-rises are the symbol of modernity and the future. High-rises often represent landmarks, since their significant vertical dimension naturally attract attention, but this is not enough, abstract form and memorable design also need to be present. They need to create sense of place identity that engages the observer. This is not only a task for the visual characteristics but also for the functions of the buildings. A sense of place identity originates from the multiple ways in which place functions to provide a sense of belonging, construct meaning, foster attachments, and manage change. The place identity of a person can inform their experiences, behaviours, and attitudes about other places (Proshansky, Fabian, and Kaminoff, 1983). Without vivid public realm, high-rise complexes are often characterized by anonymity and social isolation. The urban space as the space for social life of the people is influenced by the existence of tall buildings. Many experts stress on three main characteristics of the urban space: the space being confined; the space has aesthetic quality; social functions and activities are executed in that space. But to create lived space we need images and symbols. Lived space is a space of pure subjectivity, of human experiences. It is mainly through the specific relationship that the environment attains its symbolic significance as a substrate of social, emotional and action-related contents. The relationship with the physical surroundings is particularly considered as bound up with specific experiences (Lalli, 1992). There is a danger of simple “image-making”: the designers need to create deeper connection between the user and the result of the design. Neighbourhood perception, ideas of community, sense of belonging and a sense of place need to be enhanced. The public spaces of high-rise complexes are vital places that enable residents to develop social interaction and recognition. In other words, they are interactional spaces and “social arenas”. Residential outdoor spaces are an extension of living space and part of the home (Huang, 2006). To create regional identity, designers need to develop an identity map for each planning area. The identity map includes icons, activity nodes, focal points, essential routes and gathering places, which are landmarks in the social landscape. Such landmarks could offer stability amid change and renewal. Preserving and implementing them into the new plans is a way to reinforce the identity of the area (Kiang, 1995). Appearances can also communicate between the members of a society by providing social meaning and common experience. Historically, urban spaces are loaded with symbolic value for citizens, in ceremonies and festivals as well as in protests and conflicts. Some places and landmarks have been used as symbols of collective identity, or as markers for navigating the city. Well-designed urban environments are bringers of social meaning for the people of a city, providing a basis for social identities in the globalized, urbanized societies (Madanipour, 2006). Culture is a more prominent feature of the urban landscape. Locally and globally, it is regarded as playing a significant part in place-marketing strategies by representing the identity of a city and, by expression, displaying the

city's qualities, resulting in both attracting investment and strengthening civic pride (Wansborough and Mageean, 2010).

The aim of this study is to evaluate through observation the lived spaces and the identity of nine residential high-rise buildings in London, Birmingham and Manchester. The study achieves its goal through four research questions:

- a. What are the design means by which identity is achieved for the researched buildings?
- b. Are the identity-creating features of the individual buildings and the placemaking in conflict?
- c. What are the characteristics of the lived places?
- d. What are the major messages conveyed by the lived spaces?

2. Literature review

The architecture exemplifies the project of modernity in all its creative ambivalence more than any other field. In many cases the tensions which are so typical for modernity are given specific form by architectural projects. The universalistic ambitions of European modernity reached a built embodiment in modernist architecture which imposed form – combining aesthetic form and functionality– on the multi-cultural civilization. Although many of these civilizational styles – for example there was a German and a French Rococo – reflected culture, the universality of architecture as an expression of European civilization is doubtless (Delanty and Jones, 2002).

It is very significant that modernist architecture, distributed in the name of “International”, was embraced in many Third world countries: Turkey, Brazil, Morocco, Ghana, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Singapore among others-to represent nationhood, which was generally decided as stemming from remote antiquity and grounded in cultural uniqueness. A careful analysis shows that the mechanisms behind this are multi-layered: first the modernity became the nation's new identity and secondly: stylistic differentiation served as an important strategy in the art of identity making (Lu, 2011).

Nowadays cities challenge designers to create outdoor environments as collective, unifying frameworks for new developments. Too often the designer's contribution is limited to after-the-fact cosmetic treatment of spaces that are ill-shaped and ill-planned as a public realm in the first place. The common process of urban development regards buildings as isolated objects situated in the site, not as a part of the larger fabric of streets, squares and viable open space (Trancik, 1986)

The skyscraper developed from being an icon only of American identity and corporate power to become representative of modernity in other parts of the world. The mere height of a building was never the determinative characteristic of what became known as the “Modern Movement”. Still, for reasons mimetic of the United States, the iconic high-rise has become a metaphor of modernity (King, 2004).

Innovative design of space can effectively generate place identity in the same ways built heritage has been used in modern—culturally interrelated and nation-state-oriented—European societies. The outcome of Gospodini (2004) research supports the statement that innovative design schemes: (1) can allow divergent interpretations by individuals thereby fitting into the ‘diversity’ and ‘individualization’ of new modernity; (2) can synchronize different ethnic/cultural/social groups by serving as a new common terrain for experiencing and familiarizing with new forms of space; (3) by becoming landmarks and promoting tourism/economic development, can promote new social solidarities among inhabitants based on ‘civic pride’ and economic prospects.

3. Methodology

An observation based on observation template with several urban design and architectural questions has been implemented in order to achieve the research goal. Observation is a powerful method to use when the subject features are ready to see. The observation conducted for the study is covert, so the observed people continue with their daily activities undisturbed and there is no need for obtaining respondents’ agreement to participate in the study. There are potential ethical problems. However, an effort to preserve the privacy and anonymity of all the participants was made and the observation focused on the built environment, not the people. The observation were carried out in January, 2016.

4. Results

Nine buildings in England were examined for their architectural features promoting identity and for their contribution to the lived spaces around them. The buildings were Ontario Tower, The Shard and The Strata in London; Orion Building, The Cube, The Rotunda in Birmingham; Skyline Central, 1 Deansgate and ISIS Wharf Tower in Manchester.



Fig. 1 a) The Shard



b) Ontario Tower



c) The Strata

All the buildings are exemplifying abstract form that is unique and promotes the strong expression of values such as vigour, diversity and power. The Shard has a pyramidal structure that combined with the significant height of the building strongly impresses the viewer. Ontario building and the Strata are cylindrical prisms with cut top. Skyline Central and ISIS Wharf Tower rely on memorable massing for relentless mental image in the viewers. This is a part of the designers’ strategy to use form to evoke identity. Memorable design is also implemented to create strong architecture. However the means to do this are different. 1 Deansgate is not so high, but the

distinctive inclined columns over the basis of the buildings create unforgettable image of prominent, modern building contributing to the cosmopolitan reputation of Manchester. The Shard is a slick, elegant high-rise designed as a spire-like structure emerging from the River Thames, a positive addition to the London skyline.

The design of the Cube and the Strata relies on artistic treatment of the facades with diverse shapes and colours. Ontario Tower and the Rotunda have memorable modern facades, while the Orion Building is classic and minimalistic in the façade design. ISIS Wharf Tower and Skyline Central creates uniqueness by contrasting colours of the external walls and the glazing to stress on their impressive massing.

The placemaking with residential high-rises in England is somehow problematic due to planning reasons. Most often, the high-rises are fitted into the existing urban fabric, without providing them with enough space for social functions. Because of this, the lived space for the reviewed examples is the street.



Fig. 2 a) Orion Building

b) The Cube

c) The Rotunda

However, the buildings manage to exist in harmony with their surroundings, contributing for the positive image of the urban setting by their form and memorable design. There is contrast in heights and materials in some of the cases (The Rotunda, The Shard, The Cube) which makes the relationship with the context dramatic but the result remains aesthetic. The sense of place is mostly created by the strong presence of the high-rises. The human scale is respected by difference between the bases of the buildings and the rest and sensitive tower articulation. Because of their unique shape and contrast with the context, the high-rises can be considered landmarks. There is a problem with spacing: not all the buildings (Skyline Central, The Shard, The Strata and Orion Building) are arranged along the paths in structured and balanced manner.



Fig. 3 a) 1 Deansgate b) ISIS Wharf Tower c) Skyline Central

Their dispersed manner of arrangement damages imageability. The unique façades also lack coherence with the lower buildings around, there is chaotic mixture of styles and designs.

The lived space around the high-rises in the research are mostly the street. They are in active use, offering many services and amenities on the ground floors of the high-rises they are massively used by pedestrians too. The users can enjoy prominent modern design that evokes feelings of civic pride, challenges perceptions and offers rich urban experiences. The high-rises turn the common existing part of the city into a place worth to see and in cases of proximity to historical objects, into a palette of architectural excellence.

The messages conveyed by the lived space in conjunction with high-rises are that social interactions and active life-style are vital for the British society. The attachment to the city environment is also embedded into the message of the city street with high-rises. Going for a coffee, freedom to shop are all valued experiences that are empowered by the design of the urban space with high-rises.

5. Discussion

The search of the “own” and the preservation of values is in the roots of the formation of identity. Incorporating transcendent values in new buildings is a winning approach.

According to Torabi and Brahman (2013) there are several factors to be considered when aiming at achieving architecture with strong identity:

Spatial Organization: there must be different relationships between defined spaces in different environments. Thus using the space to affect the perception of the audience is crucial. Unfortunately, the spaces around the towers are mostly the street so there is no real differentiation and transition between different spatial functions. This is a step back in creating memorable environment with identity. However, the streets are busy and with active frontages, which enhances identity for the users.

Semantic Organization: Feelings, perceptions and experiences of a community promote shared ideas leading to definite cultural symbols known by the people. Understanding these signs is vital for the preservation of the identity in architecture. The researched towers are representing vigour and power which is typical for the high-rise architecture in England and is a trend that maintains certain image, thus promoting strong identity. The green design is also a trend expected by the users. Strata’s green power by wind turbines implemented on the roof not only contributes to unique looks but also shows that England is a nature friendly nation. Rich architectural styles in one place is also loved by the British so the researched towers implement it.

Shape and Forms: using meaningful form in creating architecture spaces can be a way to achieve identity-oriented construction in contemporary architecture. All the buildings have an abstract, engaging form that maintains unforgettable image in the viewer which helps build a strong architectural identity.

Building Materials: understanding and proper using of semantic features and materials are vital for architecture identity. The materials used are standard glass

and steel, but their visual properties are quite unique which breeds diversity and identity.

Relationship with Context: Harmony between design and the surrounding environment and the minimum intervention in the context natural environment is the way for creating identity –oriented works. The relationship with the context is dramatic due to the differences in height and the styles, while natural environment is almost missing, however the high-rises manage to create a delicate balance that is accountable for the promotion of strong place identity.

The lived spaces around the buildings are busy streets with active frontages that relate to a loved life-style and values such as prominent design and culture society. The buildings offer services and amenities on the ground floor, some more successfully than others, such as 1 Deansgate which is perfectly exemplifying modern city high-rise design, attachment to the city life and bond to the British architecture.

6. Conclusion

The high-rise architecture is spectacular and if properly designed, offers the opportunities to create strong identity. The observation of nine high-rise buildings in England led to the notion that there were created architectural objects which form and memorable design contribute positively to the image and identity of the cities they are situated in. Even though there are some problems with harmony with the context, the factors that lead to achievement of identity has been considered and the buildings manage to serve successfully their social function in the urban fabric. A serious downside is the lack of squares, gardens and playgrounds in conjunction with the high-rises which would create more value for the lived space around them. The implications of the research are that in the future planners will fix this omission and better lived spaces will be created.

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