AN APPROACH TO CONCEPTUALIZING
THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMAGE OF
AN URBAN LOCALITY FOR PLANNING

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Abstract

Recent trends in local level planning have emphasized the importance of enhancing place images. Hence, conceptualizing the form of a locality's image has become a need in urban planning. Having noted the limitations in available approaches, and the knowledge gaps for such conceptualizing through a literature review, this study was undertaken to evolve a conceptual model of the structure of a locality's image. For this purpose the results of an empirical investigation of the inhabitants' cognition were interpreted in the light of theoretical positions established by previous studies. The research was designed on the premises that the 'spatial extent' of the environment constitutes the substantial domain of urban planning and the planners aspire to work in its 'public realm'. Hence, the focus was on the shared spatial references in inhabitants' cognition. The empirical work included a questionnaire survey, a field reconnaissance and a cartographic survey. Referring to the 'invariant' and the 'context specific' characteristics of the findings, it was suggested that the environmental image of a place was a 'unitary' concept and its structure was configured of the 'reference points' both 'collectively' and 'individually' held by the inhabitants. Therefore, the model evolved here was named the unitary image of the place. Its 'collective' domain was shown as the potential area for the urban planners to intervene to work about a locality's image and thereby, to integrate inhabitants' cognition with the planning process.

Keywords: Environmental Image, Cognition, Place, Locality, Inhabitants, Spatial Elements.
DEDICATION

To my mother with gratitude.
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SUMMARY

The emerging contexts for local level planning around the world urge planners to have a better understanding of how the localities are known to their inhabitants. The environmental image, the form in which the spatial extent of a locality’s environment is represented in inhabitants’ cognition, thus, regains importance to be researched in the field of urban planning. Although many studies are available in this area, the conceptualizations of the environmental image proposed in them are limited, especially for evolving workable spatial strategies in planning. Towards mending this gap, this study proposes a conceptual model of the structure of an urban locality’s image, by theoretically and empirically investigating the form, content and the processes of its inhabitants’ cognition. The theoretical framework of the study was designed within an interactionist’s world view, and understanding a locality within the concept of place. The empirical work was designed on theoretical positions that the spatial information was schematized in cognition and its structure consisted of a network of hierarchically organized reference points, corresponding to physical-spatial elements that were recalled by people in an evaluative manner.

The empirical investigations comprised two components. The first component was a questionnaire survey with the participation of nearly three hundred residents from four localities, strategically selected from Singapore and Sri Lanka. In the survey the spatial elements that composed the residents’ cognition of the respective urban areas were elicited through free recall verbal protocols. The results of the analysis were examined to identify the patterns in which the elements were shared in inhabitants’ cognition. It was observed that a set of a few spatial elements composed a part of the ‘reference points’ for a vast majority of inhabitants’ cognition in all four localities, revealing that a locality’s image has a common core of references. In the same process the reasons for why they ‘liked’ or ‘disliked’ each of those spatial elements and why they thought each of them was ‘important’ or ‘not important’ to the respective locality were recorded.
Contents of the responses were analyzed and subjected to cluster analysis in order to establish a classification of spatial elements that had the probability to become the widely shared references in cognition, based on the homogeneity of semantics. Five categories of spatial elements were suggested, and three of them could be seen as common to all four urban areas, leading to understand that the spatial references were shared by inhabitants along with the meanings associated with them. The participants were also asked to make paired comparisons of the elements that they had mentioned, in terms of frequency of encountering, personal liking and importance to the locality. These three responses were considered as attributes through which the inter-relations between the inhabitants' and the place were expressed. These attributes were complemented with three other attributes measured in the second component of the investigation.

The second component was a combined cartographic and reconnaissance survey of those four localities. In this survey the most frequently stated spatial elements were evaluated in terms of their relative visibility, connectivity and prominence, which were also the attributes of inhabitant-place relations. All of these attributes were correlated with the frequency of stating of the elements in order to identify the attributes that were most effective to give 'reference point' status to spatial elements in different urban areas. It could be observed that only a single attribute was always having a dominant relationship with the frequency of stating.

These results of the empirical work were interpreted in the light of the theoretical positions established by previous studies, mainly the Cognitive Economy, Inter-Representational Networks, Structuration and Institutionalism. Based on this interpretation, it is suggested that the environmental image of a place is a 'unitary' phenomenon, formed by the hybrid of the 'collective' and the 'personal' domains of its inhabitants' cognition. Hence, a conceptual model, named the unitary image of the place is proposed. Some implications of this approach to conceptualizing a place in urban planning, and some possibilities of its use to evolve spatial strategies in the planning of an urban locality are discussed in the end.