

The Future of the Past

Our collective Sense of Place

Hiba Alkhalaf

PhD Researcher
University of Edinburgh
School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture
h.alkhalaf@sms.ed.ac.uk

Abstract

Historic cities are continuously under the pressure of urban development and social change that threaten its natural and cultural environment. The historic place is our engagement with the physical settings as well as the emotional and aesthetic responses to cultural events, memory and history. The challenge here is to find a balance between preserving the local character while ensuring the economic gains and continuity of its uniqueness, therefore any new intervention needs to be sensitive to the local context. Historic urban landscape expresses sense of place and thereby act as spaces for collective memory. This paper argues that sustaining sense of place throughout conservation/ development process could be used as an approach to protect as well as enhance the use, character, meaning and social interaction associated with the place. The main argument here is based on the proposition that what gives the character of the historic city is its strong sense of place- historic or current. When properly identified, its various dimensions would help determine what to sustain and what not by making the development meaningfully related to the distinctiveness of the historic place. For that purpose, sense of place within the historic urban landscape could be defined as the interaction between societies, social and economic activity and the environment within both a historic and a contemporary context; every day brings new meaning to a place based on the interaction between the buildings, its uses and social activities.

This paper, thus, explores the various perspectives of the role of sense of place in the context of the historic city of Edinburgh and its connections to cultural heritage. It also reviews urban conservation practice through sense of place as a response to the demand of change in the

Old Town and New Town. It explores the various perspectives of its users by conducting semi-structured interviews with stakeholders and focus groups with local communities across Edinburgh. Using the term sense of place within the historic environment debate suggested an approach to reconcile contradictions and loss in our heritage which understand historic place not as an object with certain values, but as a process. This process shows that sense of place could be recognised through three dimensions and perspectives; various users (public and stakeholders), official designation and the planning system.

The proposed idea of sustaining sense of place in historic urban landscape has two fold benefits; first, it enable local people to define what they value in their cities and historic place and help them to re/construct their identity; second, it facilitate the process of understanding the various values and interests of different group of users which, in its turn, invite local community and various stakeholders to engage in the conservation and development activity. The paper concludes that change is managed best when there is a shared understanding of what sense of place is for a historic urban landscape between various users; stakeholders, heritage bodies, government and local communities.

Keywords; Sense of place, heritage conservation, urban development, collective memory and identity.

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Hiba Alkhalaf
MSc (Architectural conservation), B.Arch. (Architecture)
PhD Researcher
School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture
University of Edinburgh
Mob: +447543753059
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