

CHANGES IN THE IDENTITY OF A TOWN CENTRE: A CASE STUDY OF AL-KHOMS CITY, LIBYA

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to study the changes in the identity of the town centre in Al-Khoms Libya. According to Lynch (1982) identity combines both similarity and difference, creates a sense of distinctness an individual, group or society identifies his or herself with. Identity is also used to differentiate themselves from others. In this study, the researcher will examine the uniqueness of the features and qualities which the residents link to the identity of the town centre. The first objective of the study is to study the qualities of the elements that residents associate with the identity of Al-Khoms city. Secondly, the difference in the perception of the residents pertaining to elements and qualities which are linked to the identity of different sectors of Al-Khoms city will be examined. Thirdly, the research will identify main features that have an influence on the identity of the town. Lastly, this study will also identify the qualitative attributes of elements linked with the identity of Al-Khoms. Al-Khoms city was selected for this case study since it is an ideal example of an urban settlement in Libya with rich historical and cultural heritage. The location of Al-Khoms is well known and the historical centre of the Al-Khoms is the old section of the city whereby most of the buildings and urban forms which illustrates the social and physical features of the present and past lifestyle in Libya give a sense of identity. The research adopts mixed methodologies or triangulation method which utilises both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. The quantitative approach involves the collection of data through the distribution of questionnaires to a sample of the residents in the town centre. SPSS, AMOS is used to process the data and descriptive statistics mainly frequency and percentage are used to analyse the data. The qualitative method involves focused interview, photo recognition interview, sketch map task and visual survey which includes recording and field observations.

Keywords:

Changing Identity, Image, Physical Features, Qualities, Sense Of Place, Town Centre.

INTRODUCTION

This study aims to study the changes in the identity of the town centre Al-Khoms in Libya. According to [1] identity combines both similarity and difference, creates a sense of distinctness an individual, group or society identifies his or herself with. Identity is also used to differentiate themselves from others. In this study, the researcher will examine the uniqueness of the features and qualities which the residents link to the identity of the town centre.

THE PROBLEM STATEMENT

Libyan cities today lack coherence and harmony, leading to architectural confusion and erratic architectural features. This is the consequence of an absence of a clear identity to differentiate one building from another although there are different local conditions which affect the architecture. Besides, there is a lack of initiative from town planners and the bylaw set for overseeing building architecture plans and growth. The absence of supervision led to the emergence of slums and poor architectural features. In addition, local authorities have failed to find solutions, leading to these unsighted features playing an important part in the architectural scene [2].

Previous studies done by [2, 3 and 4], have raised concerns regarding the identity of city centres in Libya. Nevertheless, their studies are more related to how the Libyan identity is expressed in the built environment. For instance, [4] studied the problem of identity loss in architecture and urban planning which had created a Libyan image in Tripoli. The focus of his study is similar to other existing researches on the image of cities done by [6 and 7]. However, his focus was in terms of the physical image of building types which were found in the city centres rather than what elements and qualities the residents' perceived to be associated with identity of the city centres.

Most Libyan cities and towns have new buildings with similar features. Many projects in Tripoli, Benghazi and Al-Khoms are duplicated in other cities and towns throughout Libya with relatively no changes. In architecture terms, buildings are starting to appear with new designs and characteristics. For instance, the use of large glass facades, the use of imported decorative materials and the lack of courtyards are some of the new attributes of modern design. Similarly, there have been more construction of high-rise and glass buildings in Al-Khoms city lately. Currently, Al-Khoms is facing physical and social problems. These could be due to the alterations which have occurred in the town centre not too long ago. Observing current architecture, there is a no integration between the people and environment that they live in. There is also little focus on simplicity or beauty driven by the natural, social, and economic environment. New buildings do not have a clear identity and no longer uses historically accepted architectural features. For instance, the simplicity of design is no longer practised with the overuse of colours and architectural decoration. European architecture has also been increasingly copied by the use of huge glass surfaces and the openness to the outside rather than having an internal courtyard. In recent times, the courtyard is the most important traditional architectural element that is missing [5].

Moreover, another issue which compounded the problem is weak management and poor supervisory system in the architecture and urbanization of the city. The main ministry responsible for policy on architecture and urbanization which is the Ministry of Housing and Planning, has been subjected to problems related to ensuring the availability of houses for the ever increasing population. In addition, the municipality has not been paying attention to the change in identity of the city because of the issues it faces internally along with a high level of workload [2].

PROPOSAL QUESTIONS

- What elements and qualities are associated with the identity of Al-Khoms city?
- What are the opinions of the residents of Al-Khoms on the changes in the identity of the town centre?

- What aspects play a major role in influencing the identity of a town?
- What are the attributes that give an identity to Al- Khoms city?

PROPOSAL OBJECTIVES

- To study the elements and qualities that residents associate with the identity of Al-Khoms city.
- To examine the difference in the perception of the residents regarding the elements and qualities which are associated with the identity of different parts of Al-Khoms city.
- To identify main features that has an influence on the identity of a town.
- To identify the qualitative attributes that are linked with the identity of Al-Khoms.

LIMITATIONS OF THE PROPOSAL

This research is only focused on studying the elements in the physical environment and the attributes that the residents associate with the identity of Al-Khoms city. Even though, activities and meanings are also important features of identity, their influence are only analysed on the basis of why the physical environment is noticeable and considered different. This study does not cover the users perception towards the town centre and is only limited to the residents' perception of identity.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROPOSAL

The research contributes to the current collection of information in both the academic and professional field. In general, it is also considered a vital step to develop a Libyan coastal city. The research revealed that political, social and economic factors are motivating forces in influencing the identity of a city. The empirical section of this research revealed how the changes in the identity of the town centre of Al-Khoms occurred. The findings of this research help to explain the role of urban planning in altering the identity of a major city in Libya, an area relatively untouched by scholars and researchers.

SELECTION OF THE STUDY AREA

Al-Khums, also known as Homs, or Al-Khoms is a city at the northwest of Libya. It is situated on the Mediterranean coast which is approximately 60 miles (97 km) st the southeast of Tripoli. Al-Khoms serves as a tourist centre for Leptis, ancient city exotic remains of the Roman architecture (Figure 1). Al-Khoms is a historical city which has a rich cultural heritage. It serves as a good exemplar of an urban settlement in Libya. The old section of Al-Khoms city serves as the historical base, home to many buildings and urban features that facilitates us to encounter the social and physical environment of its yesteryears and the present days in Libya, thus giving the city a unique identity. Colonisation has also contributed to a new phase of urban and architecture planning. This occurred before the fast development in the second half of the 20th century. Al-Khoms is the connection between Libya and the rest of the world. It is the core

of Libyan culture and arts. Therefore, it portrays the development in the architectural and urban identity of Libya.



Figure 1: Location of Al-Khoms city in Libya

LITERATURE REVIEW

Past research done on how people perceive environment offered the theoretical framework for this research. Existing theories on identity, perception, imagination and qualities associated with the identity of a city will be examined. Many researchers had reached an agreement that the identity of place involves the attributes of the physical environment, meanings, aspects, and human activities [8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15]. It is vital to remember that place identity is a result of the mutual relation between these different components. Many researchers are of the opinion that since this interrelationship is very complex, it is not easy to determine how each part of the component influences each other in order to create place identity [8, 19, and 18]. However, the attributes connected with the physical environment and activities are more tangible, and therefore, many past studies had been conducted to determine how important is their influence on identity [20].

The literature review done based on several past researchers and previous studies related to environmental perception showed the significance of the physical features and their appearance as important element for the place identity [8, 25, 26, 11 and 27]. Besides, the perception of identity is varied among the different residents depending on their demographic characteristics [29, 30, 28, 31, 32, 33, 34 and 22]. Lastly, a few elements are stated by all the residents as being part of their image of the city. These elements summarize the public image of an urban environment.

After reviewing the existing research done on the perception of the environment by the residents, a theoretical framework for this research was done. The vital attributes of the theory were examined namely the concepts of perception, cognition, image and identity of place as well as theories on the features of the identity of a place. These theories were advocated by Western scholars based on their Western perception of the built environment and physical features of the cities/. On the other hand, this research contributes a different perspective to the past research as it offers a base for further investigation from a Libyan context.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research uses triangulation method or a mixed methodology approach utilising both the quantitative and qualitative method of data collection and analysis. This is similar to other urban environmental research done by [23, 24, 21, 17, 13, and 16]. Quantitative method uses questionnaires which are distributed to a sample of residents in the town centre. The sample survey involves 100 residents from the residential areas within the town centre boundaries. The data collected from the survey gives information on the perception of residents regarding the environment of the town centre as well as the residents' profiles. The survey data is analysed using SPSS, AMOS and descriptive statistics for example frequencies and percentages. A cross-tabulation table is also utilised to identify the elements perceived by the respondents of different gender, ethnic and age groups. The qualitative methodology involves four techniques which are focused interview, photo recognition interview, sketch map task and visual survey that involve recording and field observations. Thirty residents were involved in the interviews. Qualitative analysis is further done on the data collected from this second phase. The photo recognition interview and focus interview were recorded on tape and transcribed. Analysis of the interview is focused on the recurrent themes and categories which are captured in the transcripts. The findings of the research are based on the summary of the cross analysis between the qualitative and quantitative approaches.

OUTLINE OF THE THESIS

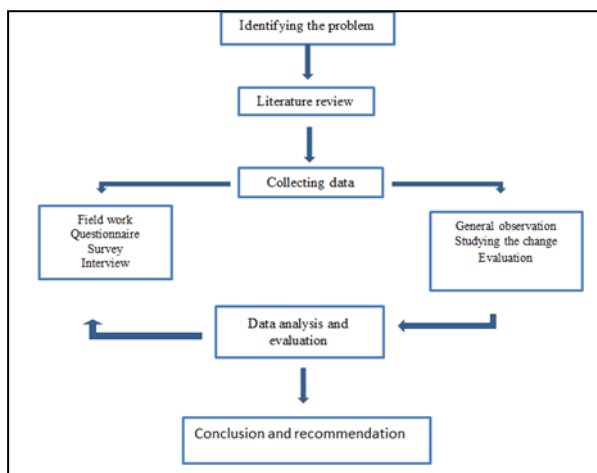


Figure 2: Outline of the Thesis

EXPECTED RESULTS

- The findings will reveal the difference in perception of elements associated with identity of different parts of the Al-Khoms city.

- The findings will identify the elements which are considered unique by the residents in Al-Khoms town centre and the qualities which are associated with these identities.
- The findings will be associated with the quality attributes linked with the identity of the town centre.

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