

REDEFINING LANDMARKS

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ABSTRACT

Paths, nodes, districts, landmarks and edges as classified by Kevin Lynch have been strongly debated since the 1960's and the typical issue of contentment would be about the overlapping definitions between some categories and their order of importance. For example, can a node be a landmark? Some commentators consider that landmarks are one of the most significant urban components and possibly more important than other components that require examination and appraisal. This paper will discuss if landmarks can be perceived beyond their archetypal perception of being tall, large, monumental, distinct, and referring only to buildings or towers. It is the aim of the study to expand the notion of landmarks into several categories.

Keywords: *landmark, tower, building, open space, special urban features*

Introduction

The term and concept of “landmark, paths, edges, districts and nodes” were first introduced by Lynch (1960) in his seminal work, *Image of the City*. Landmarks are one of the components that Lynch (1960) hypothesized as contributing to imageability of cities. In terms of Gestalt theory of visual perception, landmarks are elements with defining characteristics that are different from their surroundings and easily recognised or discernible from a particular station. Landmarks may be literally buildings that are different from their surroundings as well as an element of the urban scene such as open spaces or curiosity object such as an old clock or a place where some special event occurs or occurred (Moughtin *et al*, 1999).

Landmarks can also be defined as features with distinctive spatial features and by virtue of their colours, shape or semantic values have the potential to help people to orientate or find their way in the environment (Lynch, 1960; Tlauka and Wilson, 1994; Appleyard, 1970). Moughtin *et al* (1999) defines a landmark as an element or a group of coherent elements that can be singled out against a landscape background of repetitive detail. These are physical components “*whose key physical characteristic...is singularity, some aspect that is unique or memorable in the context. Landmarks become more easily identifiable, more likely to be*

chosen as significant, if they have a clear form; if they contrast with their background; and if there is some prominence of spatial location. Figure background contrast seems to be the principal factor"(Moughtin *et al*, 1999, pp. 45). This key definition by Lynch (1960), which encompasses and representative of many traditional concepts of landmarks provides a significant platform in this article from which the process of recategorization or redefinition will be discussed.

Moughtin (1999) in his book 'Urban Design: Ornament and Decoration' discussed on categories and importance of landmarks. Two dimensional and three dimensional objects have been identified as the main categories in city ornamentation (Moughtin *et al*, 1999). The former refers to enclosed two dimensional planes such as streets and squares while the latter encompasses elements that include buildings, major civic monuments and utilitarian street furnitures. There is also suggestion by Passini *et al* (1999) to view fountains or '*objects with a particular meaning*' as landmarks.

The open spaces can be understood to be as paths and nodes by Lynch's (1960) definition, while the three-dimensional landmarks fit appropriately with Lynch's (1960) definition of a city landmark. However, the distinction between the two is not exclusive, neither are the boundaries precise. Similarly, as noted in the case of a study of Birmingham by Goodey, Duffet, Gold & Spencer (1971), features such as the Bull Ring could either be a landmark, a node or indeed a district, depending on the way in which a respondent represented it, used it or interpreted it. Because of the presence of underground shopping areas, ring roads and domination by substantial structures, the exact definition of the Bull Ring as categorized by Lynch (1960) becomes rather blurred. Therefore, in practical terms, the question of whether a tower block at a junction of roads and paths leading to the tower block is a node or a landmark is relevant. A study conducted by Evans *et al* (1981) using landmarks for environmental learning have included parks, squares and statues as part of the research stimuli. Hence, the possibility that a node can be a landmark, an edge can be a path and a node can be a district depending on where and how you see it and how you use it. It is on these premise that it has been decided to redefine and recategorize landmarks based on a conglomeration of the two above categories.

Open spaces and special urban features could also be considered legible and distinctive components of the city. Studies done by Salim (1993), Lynch (1960) and Moughtin *et al* (1999) indicated a preference for opens spaces and special urban features as landmarks as they would for towers and buildings.

Based on the range of definitions, it can be suggested that landmarks can be redefined and categorised to include towers, buildings, open spaces and special urban features.

Towers

Towers have been designed and built in almost all cultures from time immemorial. Man has always strived toward height and its early association with spirituality. Factors, which have driven Mankind to built towers, are the quest for power, position, wealth and domination (Heinle & Leonhardt, 1989). The drive to express power and grandness later led to numerous towers on town halls, religious buildings and palaces. These symbolic towers also have practical purposes such as to house church bells or in recent years to install telecommunication equipment.

The early design and height were limited by the traditional knowledge of building technology and availability of materials. The modern towers, which were developed through the industrial era, produced new forms of architectural language through the use of modern materials such as iron, steel, aluminium, glass panels and reinforced concrete.

Substantial urban structures such as high-rise, towers or skyscrapers are prominent which have been rapidly changing the public impression of urban areas (Nasar, 1989). When a tower has a dominant physical characteristic, it can be a landmark to a city and can play a role in urban design (Heinle & Leonhardt, 1989). Towers are urban components that follow closely the growth of the city which are a response to dense population concentration, high land costs and scarcity of land. The primary need to placing a maximum number of people on a minimum area of land consequently have size, height and self-sustainable implications. A tower of enormous scale such as Petronas Towers can form “a city within a city” where a complex interaction system is required to support activities and facilities such as shopping, entertainment, recreation, parking, transportation, utilities and many more.

For most developing countries such as Malaysia, towers are tangible and popular reflections of the state of development of the country. The skyline of Kuala Lumpur has changed during the late 1970's and early 1980's from predominantly two-storey traditional shops to one scattered with high-rise buildings and towering architectural complexes. The design of towers in the city was influenced by various factors such as, functional requirements, climate, imageries, architectural heritage and expression of indigenous, cultural or religious elements. Some of the more prominent high-rise buildings or towers have had a major influence on the aesthetics of their immediate urban landscape; location and function of open spaces and landscape furniture.

In terms of height, Salim (1993) has noted that most tall buildings or towers within the Central Business District (CBD) of Kuala Lumpur have a general plot ratio of 1:9 or some as far as 1:18. Hence, based on Salim's (1993) findings, it has been decided that the determining factor to identify the physical verticality of any towers or high-rise buildings where the minimum plot ratio is 1:9. While a tall obelisk may qualify as a tower, proper towers have to be symbolic as well as humanly useable while tall special urban features have been defined as having only a symbolic use. Towers should characteristically be vertically accentuated and dominate not only the surrounding landscape but also be visibly distinct among the city's skyline.

Buildings

In the same context as towers, buildings are arguably the most fundamental elements in most cities. Equally, the architectural qualities of buildings in any city are a key determinant of its aesthetic character. As visually sensible objects, buildings possess certain distinguishable visual qualities or attributes. Moughtin (1999) sees buildings as landmarks if they dominate the surroundings by virtue of their ornamentations, size and scale, contrast and dominance over other components other than towers. They should also be able to provide the memorable image by which cities can be related to. In contrast to towers, buildings are generally less distinctive among the city's skyline and generally seen as part of it or to further accentuate towers. They are more distinguishable if perceived at a relatively closer distance.

Moughtin (1999) noted that buildings or even towers could be the positive object designed as a three-dimensional mass, the 'figure' in the composition while the space in which they stand is the 'ground'. The alternative is that space itself becomes the "figure" and the buildings or towers become the 'ground'. The basic plot ratio of buildings in Kuala Lumpur CBD is 1:4 and 1:3 for areas outside CBD (Salim, 1993). Therefore, the buildings as categorized should not be higher than 4-5 storeys or where the plot ratio is between 1:3 and 1:4.

Open Spaces

Basically there are open spaces of a regional scale and of a macro-urban scale. Tankel (1963) argues that solely focussing at the regional scale means to ignore the smaller units of space which when aggregated, constitute a macro-scale urban space. The space at the macro-urban scale can be identified as the top of the hierarchy and the street, which is an area of space defined, by a group of surrounding buildings as the lowest.

The author challenges Spreiregen's (1965, pp35) notion of open spaces as “ *ideally be enclosed by surrounding walls, have a floor which suits its purpose, and have a distinct purpose to serve*”. This study has also adopted streets, which may not have distinct

boundaries, as open spaces because the nature of use of streets in Kuala Lumpur is flexible and adaptive. For example, some streets are part of main open spaces and some are regularly closed to form outdoor bazaars, which is one typical proper open space activity in Kuala Lumpur. This definition is supported by Marcus *et al.*, (1998) or Salim (1993) in his study which categorised streets in Kuala Lumpur namely; Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman, Jalan Masjid India and Chow Kit Road, which have through vehicular traffic, as street type open spaces or landmarks. Salim (1993) also argued that these streets are essentially associated with major functions or activities even if they do not conform to the conventional physical descriptions of open spaces with visible boundaries. Instances of street closure to create pedestrian malls have highlighted their potential to become important open space elements or landmarks for public use and enjoyment in the city. Despite the lack of legible physical characteristics such as boundaries, Petaling Street and Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman qualify as open space landmarks because of their distinct cultural and social focus (Gifford, 1997) provide the less tangible borders.

There are basically two types of open spaces (Trancik, 1986). Hard urban open spaces are fundamentally a created closure and usually bounded by architectural walls and function as major gathering places for social activities. Soft urban open spaces, on the other hand, are predominantly made up of natural elements such as vegetation and water bodies predominantly found in Perdana Lake Gardens and Titiwangsa Lake Gardens in Kuala Lumpur.

Urban open spaces can be categorized by use, size, style, main activities, architectural form, relationship to street and location (Marcus, 1998; Tunnard and Pushkarev, 1963). Banerjee and Loukaitou-Sideris (1992) highlighted that men tend to dominate the use of most open spaces while women are likely to come in groups. Whyte (1980) noted that men favour front locations whereas women favour the rear sections of public open spaces. Men also have a totally different concept of open spaces and what they desire from it (Mozingo, 1984). The most appropriate location or urban open spaces are those that attract a wide variety of users and need to be well proportioned for comfort of use (Gehl, 1987, Lynch, 1960). Critical understanding of the existing spaces can also ensure successful use (Trancik, 1986). Open spaces should also be pleasurable (Tibbalds, 1992), sustainable (Robertson, 1990) and should have an intimate relationship with nearby buildings (Reekie, 1972).

Open space landmarks either with or without distinguishable characteristics may have inherent qualities such as their strategic location, historical value or type of activities. Open

spaces are fundamentally nodes and districts that have similar features as landmarks. Open spaces, nodes and districts have the power to influence the imageability and legibility of cities. They also have the capacity to be a point of concentrated activities and can be used as reference points. Contrary to Lynch's (1960) definition, some landmarks can be experienced from within but not necessarily for orientation purposes.

Special Urban Features

Apart from towers, buildings and open spaces, a city includes all other built structures, which are sometimes given the name of 'urban furniture' or 'civic furniture (Moughtin *et al*, 1999). As built structures, these elements possess the same visual qualities as all other man-made structures, namely sculptural form and shape, line, colour, texture, scale, size or mass (Taylor, 1999). However, this description remains very broad and amorphous, including as it does, designed three-dimensional elements in the city, which is not a tower, building or open spaces. It might help, therefore, to make more sense of this category of multifarious elements by distinguishing between two different kinds of aesthetic function that these elements can perform. First, there are elements, which are predominantly perfunctory or utilitarian with no or little influence on the environmental aesthetics. Second; there are structures, which appear to have profound aesthetic qualities, and with distinct locational characteristics such as fountains, sculptures or wall murals at major road junctions or in the middle of a major open space. The study has opted for the second description by naming it '*special urban features*'.

Special urban features can generally be defined as public or environmental art and they should have excellent criteria and positive contributions to the life of the city such as delight, fantasy, amenity, sociability, joy and delight (Crowhurst-Lennard & Lennard, 1987).

Crowhurst *et al* (1987, pp57) define this form of art or special urban features as "*a work of art...in a collection open to the public,, an aesthetic combination of colours, textures, shapes, etc.expected to speak profoundly to a larger percentage of the population who inevitably use the public space in which it is located*".

Special urban features can range from the most sublime to the most unique and the monumental to the less monumental. They can draw on cultural metaphors and mythology or simply celebrate local identity by creating a form that can be manipulated, walked under or sat on (Marcus *et al*, 1998). The symphony fountain of the KLCC Park in Kuala Lumpur was created to celebrate the achievement of building the Petronas Towers and the tallest flagpole at the Merdeka Square symbolizes the country's spirit of independence and patriotism. The

former is a more sophisticated and delightful urban feature that can be interactive while the latter is more prosaic but its sheer height is captivating.

Moughtin *et al* (1999) sees these special features as important ornaments, either large or distinctive enough to act as landmarks as well as to decorate the city with art. Special urban features should also have the ability to promote interaction and communication between the city and users. A fountain, sculpture or a statue that is highly visible and has strong attraction, can encourage people to stop, sit nearby, or literally used the feature as a focal landmark. Ordinary utilitarian landscape furniture such as steps, benches and railings that qualify as works of art can also be categorised as special urban features. The more ornate and clean the features are, the more stronger the preference (Nasar, 1983).

The debate over the suitable role of special urban features as environmental art or its ability to provide social critique should not outweigh the need to make the public feel comfortable with it. It should also neither be homogenous or predictable just to please the masses. Its design and design process should include the “artist” himself and a large cross section of the public. This would result in pieces of environmental art that would benefit the general public and beyond the issue of extreme elitism (Marcus, 1998). Hence, an understanding of the perceptions of designers and laypublic for special urban features is a worthwhile endeavour.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be suggested that the definition of landmark in the context of this article is “*any urban landscape feature with manifested or inherent attributes which is physically or spiritually unique, influential, impressive and generally in contrast with its contextual characteristics*” which encompasses components such as towers, buildings, open spaces and special urban features.

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