

# Evolving and Transforming Place-identities

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**Abstract** There have been many concerns over the last three decades about the way we build cities and their neighbourhoods. Many critics claim that this is the result of the globalization processes through which built form components are produced. This inevitably leads to the homogenous places, where similar patterns are replicated and the users as well as the critics see such places as anonymous, anywhere places.

In response to this phenomenon many theorists have engaged in a critical discourse about place, identity and place-identity. Practitioners dealing with the form-production processes have also focused their work on designing places that would be seen as unique, distinctive, and responsive to the local cultural contexts whilst also aiming to generate new typology of buildings and open spaces, that would respond to new and evolving human needs.

Particularly challenging have been transformations of rundown housing estates, where the users have a negative relationship with such areas, and claim that there is no sense of place, no sense of place-identity. The paper will first discuss some of the key theoretical ideas which will serve as basis for discussing urban transformation of a former rundown area in South Islington, London.

**Keywords:** place-identity, morphological transformations, community engagement.

There is a widespread concern today for the changes being made in many cities across the world as a result of the globalized form-production processes that are contributing to the erosion of the place-identity. This is particularly evident in the transformation of historic urban areas where new urban form patterns have little respect for the inherited urban past. With the same architectural building and open space typology being applied in different parts of the world, usually in the form of tall buildings or large urban complexes, some critics call such developments as the 'citadels of power' or what Elizabeth Wilson refers to as the 'sphinx in the city' (1992). This phenomenon is also influenced by the accumulation of capital and investments by large finance corporations and development companies that move their capital globally and invest their resources in schemes that ensure a safe return on their investment. As a result, many critics (Abel, 2000; Graham and Howard, 2008; Castells (2006) and Sassen (2012) as well as the ordinary users of such places see these changes as anonymous, anywhere places. Castells (2006) argues that there is a broken sense of continuity with the past leading to the loss of the distinctive cultural landscapes and the erosion of the way of life. Harvey (2013) also argues that the space-time continuum is compressed and the ideas that took ages to travel in the past are now communicated virtually and instantly, which creates similar visual landscapes that can be shared across the world.

In order to respond to these concerns, it is important to theorise about these issues to form

a common platform for debate and to find potential solutions. In that regards, there is no shortage of the published material and theories that cut across many disciplines from earlier work published by environmental psychologists and sociologists (Castells, 2006 ); urban geographers (Graham and Howard, 2008); and planning, architecture and urban design experts (Butina Watson and Bentley, 2007; Southworth and Ruggeri, 2011 ). The loss of place-identity, some argue (Castells, 2006; Butina Watson and Bentley, 2007) can diminish and alter distinctive characteristics of places that were historically rooted in the local context and can therefore potentially reduce the interaction between people and place. Castells states (2006) that the sense of continuity over time is important in constructing a set of images and ideas about places we inhabit. However, as Butina Watson and Bentley (2007) and Sepe (2013) argue place-identities are formed over time, they are also evolving and transforming through the interaction of people and place. Through the interaction between people and place we form meanings and interpretations of places, construct our own identity and therefore place-identity.

There are many definitions of place-identity, but the ideas put forward by Butina Watson and Bentley who state that ...'place-identity is the set of meanings associated with any particular cultural landscape which any particular person or group of people that draws on in the construction of their own personal and social identities' (2007,p..6), is still most commonly

used today. It is therefore very important that we design places that allow interaction between place and people, which is also what Harvey (2013) refers to as the idea of 'public sphere' as an arena of political, and therefore also potentially democratic deliberation and participation, where political ideals may be attained and where associations between people and place can contribute to the interpretation of identity and place-identity. It is important to state the way we use our cities and neighbourhoods and interpret place-identity goes beyond the mere visual interpretations. We experience places through our daily lives and patterns of human use and therefore through all our senses; it is a total environment which is what Scott Lash describes as 'inhabitation' (1999). Through these practices of daily use and experience we also contribute to the enhancement of such places through what David Novitz refers to as the 'participatory aesthetics' (2001).

So, what happens when the places we inhabit are seen negatively by their users, when we live in the landscapes of fear, where our democratic right to use and inhabit such places is reduced? Many users and critics see such places as lacking in character and lacking in supporting our positive interpretations of place-identity. This is most obvious and of some concern in some of the urban areas where we can see the broken linkages with the past and where the ability to 'inhabit' such spaces is reduced due to a variety of factors. For example, the inappropriate infrastructure systems such as those evident in the former Boston's Downtown Artery before it

was replaced by a system of streets and open spaces (Butina Watson and Bentley, 2007). We can also see that from some of the modernist housing estates where we experience fear of crime, high levels of pollution, social deprivation and the building typology and morphology that fragments our cities?

The question is how do we engage with these issues through practice of planning, urban design and architecture? As we shall see the methodology put forward by Butina Watson and Bentley in their book *Identity by Design* (2007) is still valid, and useful in shaping existing and in designing new places.

As urban critics and designers we operate at different morphological levels: the landscape components; the overall spatial structure (streets and public open spaces); the overall patterns of use; block and plot structures; and the level of building and open space typology. However, these morphological and typological components also require qualitative dimensions, to reflect on how human experiences and perceptions form part of our place-identity interpretations.

From the operational point of view these qualitative components are summarised as : co-dwelling with nature; the sense of empowerment (derived from the responsive environments criteria such as permeability/connectivity/accessibility; variety; legibility; robustness/resilience; personalization; and richness); sense of rootedness and continuity with the past; and transculturality (accommodating the needs of

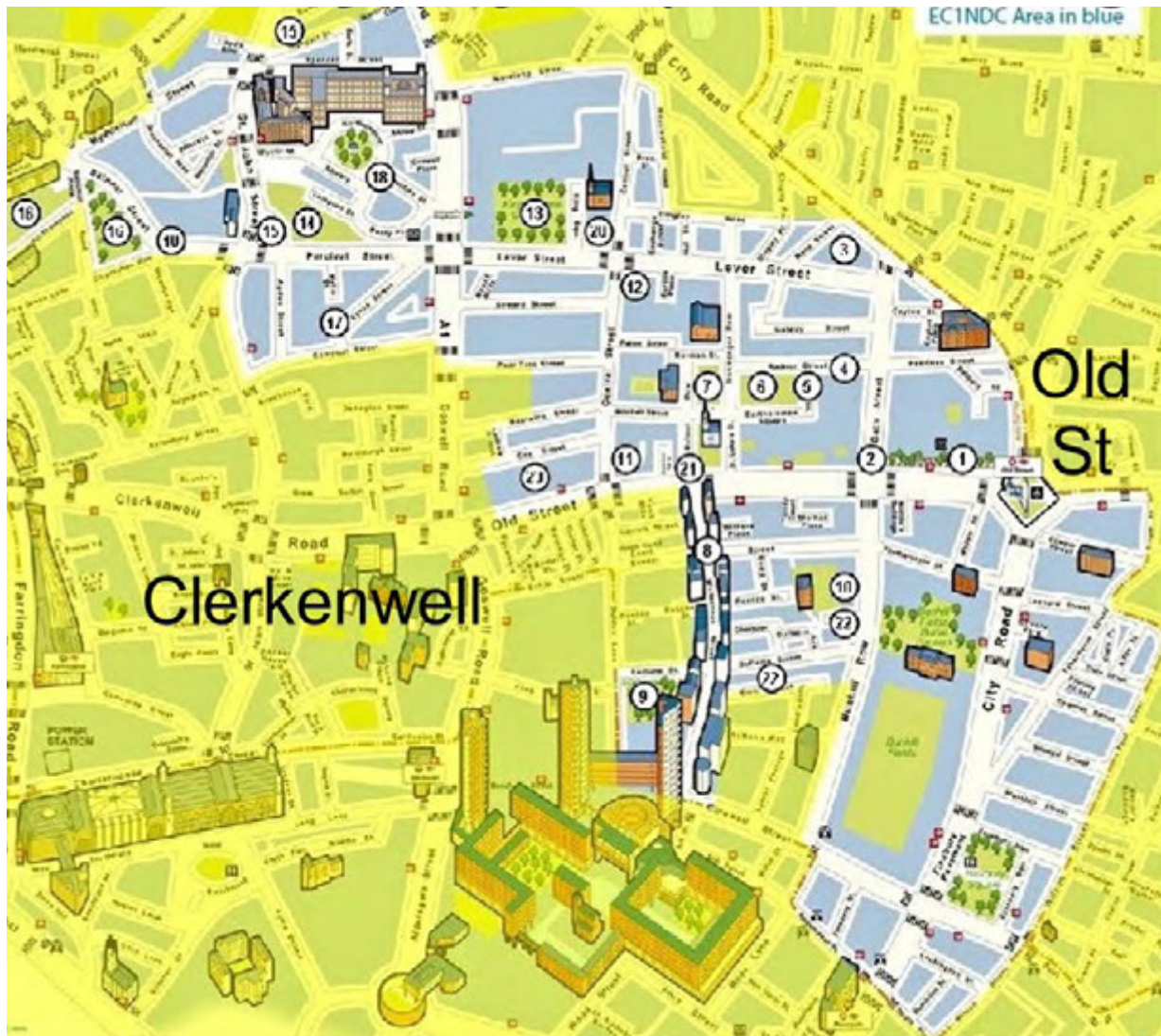


Figure 1 (Source By Author)

different communities). In the following section of this paper we shall discuss how urban transformations that are taking place in the part of London, known as South Islington EC1, have

changed and are changing the interpretations of place-identity. The evaluation methodology employed over the last decade by the author of this paper includes a longitudinal study consist-

ing of morphological and typological surveys; semi-structured interviews with key players; focus group discussions with residents, planners, urban designers and landscape architects; and some 350 conducted walks with various groups of users.

The EC1 area of South Islington is one of the central London Boroughs located next to the City of London, the very hart of its global financial investments and international trade. EC1 evolved historically as a historic district composed of a typical morphology that evolved over time accommodating a variety of Georgian and Victorian houses. Due to its proximity to the City it suffered a radical destruction as a result of the Second World War Two bombing of London during the Blitz of 1941. This part of the city became a disaster zone that lost many of its inhabitants as well as buildings destroyed during the attacks. The damaged areas of Islington were rebuilt in the post war reconstruction period during 1950s, 1960s and 1970s based on the modernist morphology and typology that was the favoured approach by the Greater London Council responsible for planning and city building at the time. As a result, the morphology of South Islington changed whereby traditional Georgian and Victorian town houses were combined with modernist housing estates. This also reflected the varied social demographic structure of the area with poorer residents living in high rise tower blocks, whilst the rest of the richer residents living in more traditional neighbourhoods. This led to the double-coded interpretations of place-identity, depending in

which part of Islington people lived, worked and socialised.(Figure 1)

By the early 2000 the area experienced a serious decline economically and socially and suffered from the lack of investment in the maintenance of its area and showed all the signs of other similar areas of deprivation. It felt neglected, run down, bleak, unsafe and lacked quality buildings and green open spaces. As a result, most journeys made by the residents were car bound which further contributed to the run-down image of the area as instead of streets there were roads full of cracks and asphalt. Children's play areas were also tarmacked and there was no one about. Open spaces around tower blocks and other buildings were poorly defined, interrupted by abandoned and vandalised garages and there was no clear distinction of what was public or private space and as a result suffered from anti-social behaviour and vandalism. From a residents' point of view the area was seen as negative, with no sense of place and place-identity. (Figure 2)

In order to turn the area around, a bid was placed by Islington Borough Council under the Central Government scheme known as the New Deal for Communities and in 2004 EC1 became one of the 39 NDC areas which required a community engagement and partnership working between different professionals and local government officers in order for funds to be released. This resulted in the creation of a vision for the area, formulated between various stakeholders and articulated through:



- 1 A Public space strategy
- 2 Urban Design Framework Plans, Action Plans and project design
- 3 Appointment of a multi-professional team
- 4 Collaborative engagement with residents
- 5 Interdepartmental working



Figure 2 (Source By Author)

The Open Space strategy led to the formulation of the so called 'Green Chain' which basically included 7 housing estates, a system of 19 streets, 8 parks, markets and various business and social facilities. The green chain is a connector between different parts and it ties all different areas together. The visioning events were particularly focused on how to enhance and

improve a sense of place-identity in the neighbourhood. The initial funding of some 50 Million (2004-2011) finished in 2011 but the ongoing work is being supplemented by other Local Authority (LB Islington) funding mechanisms and other resources, including contributions being made from other high-profile developments in the area under the planning mechanism known as Section 106.

The area evaluations carried out by the author over the last decade has identified that significant improvements made to the area have also changed the users' perception in terms of a very positive interpretation in place-identity terms. Improved and connected open spaces are full of people which has increased area's vitality and safety. Children are out and about playing in new green areas and there is also a positive sense of community spirit and local pride. These findings also support Lash's concept of place-identity in terms of 'inhabitation' and Watson's and Bentley's definition of place-identity, explained earlier. The revitalised White Cross Street Market is also contributing positively economically and socially through local events and festivals and through public art, which is another dimension of place-identity. The open space strategy also made morphological improvements in terms of connecting different urban tissues so that different parts are seen as part of one single whole.(Figure 3,4,5,6,7)

In conclusion, we can say that place-identities are not static; they are evolving in order to support different societal needs. Places also need to

be cared for, be managed, improved and loved by their communities as they are part of our own changing and evolving identities. Bringing together theory and practice is important if we are to generate solutions that can support places with a positive sense of place-identity.

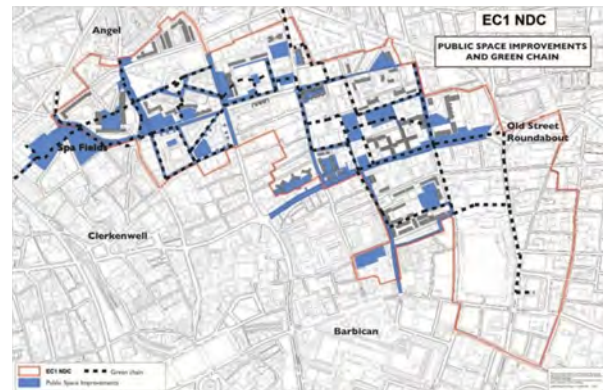


Figure 3,4,5,6,7 (Source By Author)

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She is Professor in Urban Design and Associate Lecturer in Planning and Urban Design at Oxford Brookes University, UK. Her professional expertise lies in the area of urban morphology; urban regeneration; local community involvement including different age groups; the improvement of local urban areas; place-identity; retrofitting cities for sustainability; urban growth management; and healthy cities.  
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