

The Meaning of Place, A Constant or Changing Quality?

Lynch, Rapoport and Semiotics View points

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Abstract

The matter of meaning in place, is one of the main qualities of human life. People consciously or unconsciously looking for meanings in places. The importance of finding the meaning of place is that, Understanding the meaning will lead to “act” in place. Finding the place friendly, or finding it insecure will lead to act differently.

Now the question is that, is the meaning of place, something constant to put in place for ever or something changing from time to time. Does it related to physical elements of place or to the people using the place?

Understanding the answers of questions above, would help the placemakers plan and design places better than before and meaningless places won't happen anymore.

Keywords: Meaning, Place, Constant, Changing.

1. Introduction

comparing new and old places, Shultz says: “Although a good order is visible in new places, but it is from bird's eye and not people who are living in the city. Living in places which can lead to individuality and belonging to place, has been missed”(Schulz, 1980).

Schulz here was taking about the quality of life in place and One of the main qualities is meaning. how people understand the place and their environment is important for their reactions in place. And when people react in environment as what the placemaker predicts, the place is working for its target.

In order to know about the meaning of place, one important question is whether the meaning is a fixed or changing part of the place? Can it be added to place by special elements or may it is not something physical which could be prepared for places?

Three main approaches to meaning of place have been chosen in this article, to find if their elements of meaning are fixed or removable in place?

2. Research Methodology

This article is based on a theoretical research, so it's benefiting from descriptive-analytical approach. To Answer the question of the article, three main approaches in the meaning of the place had been chosen.

In collecting primitive data, firsthand documents and written materials of all three approaches have been chosen and taking written notes from original documents have been considered.

In order to analysis, Content analysis on written materials have been used. Logical reasoning in comparing the findings will lead to respond the question of this research

3. Kevin Lynch's sense of meaning

Kevin Lynch, an American urban planner (1918-1984) in A Theory of Good City Form (1981) in order to ensure the quality of a city, introduces five principals which one of them is meaning of place (Lynch, 2005).

Lynch has defined the meaning of the city as: “meaning is how a city can be clearly understood And how its inhabitants can bring it to visualize in their mind”. The mindset is to some extent related to the values and concepts of society (Lynch, 2005).

Cause Lynch takes meaning in the interaction between person and place (Lynch, 2005, p. 167) he introduces this quality both depends on the shape and physical-spatial dimension of the space and to the Humane Society characteristics such as culture, character, location, and experience of the observer.

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Lynch introduces meaning as conformity of environmental and emotional, mental and cultural structures of its inhabitants. That's why a fixed place among different observers means differently, But since all

these observers share certain characteristics such as biology, common perceptions and cultural norms, there is a collective common meaning between them.

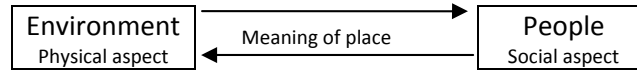


Fig. 1. Dependence of meaning to environment and people in Lynch's perspective

Based on this shared vision between the human and environment, Lynch does depend meaning on two key factors; the identity and structure. The structure is the characteristic form of place and identity is the relation of people and places.

Lynch believes that the events that occur in space, such as special celebrations and ceremonies can also make meanings (Lynch, 2005, p. 169).

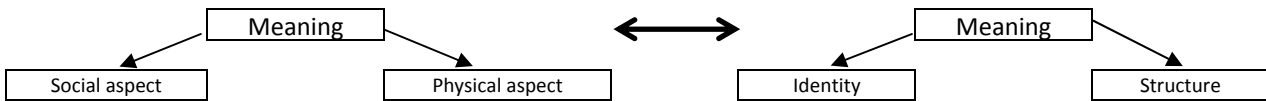


Fig. 2. The main aspects of the meaning for Lynch

Lynch sees the city as a means of communication which has implicit and explicit symbols. Symbols that contain flags, intersections, signs, picture windows, columns and trees are which carrying messages such as property, status, belonging to, covert operations, services and correct behaviors.

4. Rapoport's sense of meaning

Amos Rapoport (1923), is considered as one of the urban scholars in environmental studies and behavior (EBS). He who has a cultural view to the issue of cities in his book "meaning the built environment, an approach in nonverbal communication" (1982) explained the meaning of place.

In His book, Rapoport has adopted non-verbal approach and considered meaning as a communication issue. In his view point the Meaning of environment is achievable through direct observation of the environment and see references in it and interpret them. Thus, cities can identify by seeing the type of clothing of its inhabitants, its type of buildings, shops and ... (Rapoport, 2005, p. 94).

According to Rapoport, people in the environment communicate verbally, vocally, and non-verbally (Rapoport 1982, p. 49). vocal and verbal behaviors, deal with hearing. In non-verbal communication, although the sense of sight is involved, but auditory, tactile, olfactory,

or other senses are also important and hence this connection (Rapoport, 2005, p. 50).

In Rapoport's viewpoint, the environment is full of references and codes that although they do not convey the message verbally, but has the meaning of environment inside (Rapoport, 2005, p. 50). He states that the information in the environment has codes and needs to be decoded (Rapoport, 2005, p. 86).

Rapoport in his opinion to the meaning had given two points: one is reference, and the second is the text. The role of the text in his viewpoint is learning the meanings of signs and then decode them. He says: "People often act based on reading of environmental cues, ... thus the language that is used in this environmental implications should be fully understood ... The environment must be designed in such a way that people can clearly understand the code. If the codes are not understood, one can't interact with the environment ... Not understanding codes, is similar to the experience of being in the unfamiliar culture and so can be a culture shock" (Rapoport, 2005, p. 59).

In Rapoport's view, the meaning is affected by the states (Rapoport, 2005, p. 75). For example, meaning of using informal dresses in formal and informal situations is different. Although informal dress is constant, but different meanings come to the mind according to the context. Informal dress in formal situation can mean to

protest or neglect the formal settings, which does not give the same meaning in informal situations.

For Rapoport, meaning also depends on the decoder person. He emphasizes the importance of coding the environment, according to a person that will decode it. Now the question is how people understand the meaning? Rapoport takes the meaning as a cultural issue. He says many of these lessons took place in the early years of life and via culture (Rapoport, 2005, p. 67). "we are told and shown how to treat people and what people expect from us, a part of the world objectives comes from other people applying it"(Rapoport, 2005, p. 61). Alongside the culture, He also points out the environment that is effective in the limited response, defining the position and to show people how to behave.

Rapoport, divided the environment into three categories of elements:

- Fixed elements
- Semi-fixed elements
- Non-fixed elements

Fixed elements in the environment As their name implies,

in terms of physical location are stable and change rarely and slowly. These include walls, roofs, floors in the field of architecture and streets and buildings in urban scale. (Rapoport, 2005, p. 95).

Fixed elements, how they position in place and even their order in place have meaning.

The second group of elements is semi-fixed elements. These elements include a variety of components from furniture, curtains, stands, street furnitures, shop windows and other elements of the city. (Rapoport, 2005, p. 96)

Rapoport knows the importance of these elements more than constant elements in transmission of meaning in the environment. He believes that designers do not need to completely design everything. Giving the opportunity to personalize and to create place is the opportunity of making meaning for users.

The Third category is non-fixed elements. This category of elements, include humans and their environment and data transmission through their physical position, gestures and visual expressions, pauses and speed of speech and many other non-verbal behavior (Rapoport, 2005, pp. 104 and 105). Studies related to this field are linked to urban anthropology.

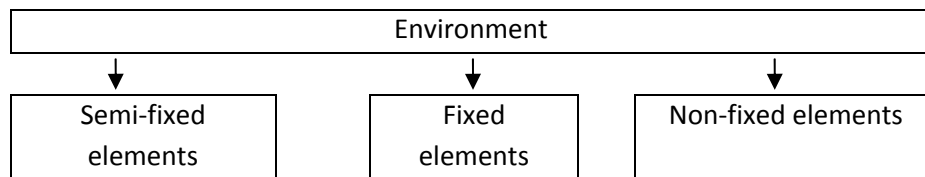


Fig. 3. Elements of environment from Rapoport viewpoint

5. Semiotics sense of meaning

Another approach to the meaning of place that is used in many fields of knowledge is Semiotics. This approach was first introduced in linguistics by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1839).

The main theme of Semiotics is to study of sign systems. In Sign systems such as fashion, theater, music, photography, ethics, computer, ... and also in urban studies and architecture Semiotics has helped understanding the meaning (Kamrani, 2009, p. 52).

Using a model called a sign, Semiotics is explaining how the meaning is conveyed. A Single sign is consists of a signifier (form) and a signified (concept) (Sojudi, 2008, p. 18).

Each sign is shaped to convey a message. (Gyro, 2001, p. 39) For example, the traffic light is a sign, because the green light, is a signifier for the concept of moving.

Semiotics as well as two previous views, depends meaning on a set of elements. Structure, text, media and codes are the most important elements of meaning in Semiotics.

Structure in Semiotics, is the system and the general framework of the meaning and significance. No sign outside of its structure is meaningful. For example, the whole meaning of the texts is originated by the structure of literary. All of realist novels make meaningful based on realism structure.

Text is a part of the structure that has been materialized by an author. In linguistics, it can be said that the language in general is a structure and speech is the text made by an individual (Chandler, 2008, p. 320), when speaking of writing a novel in special genre, must say

that, the genre that could arise in hundreds of novels by various authors, is a structure. Every novel in a genre is a text that inherits its characteristic from the structure and author. In fact, the writer brings structure in the form of a novel. Text is not an independent phenomenon, but the Structure is.

Another concept associated with meaning in Semiotics, is media. In Semiotics, the term media refers to various means of communication such as books, radio, cinema and fashion (Gyro, 2001, p. 31). Signs, always communicate in the form of a media, so medias are the limitations and capabilities. Users take media as a tool that is transparent and ineffective in representing meaning, but it actually is involved in the meaning and the media specifications are effective in conveying the message (Chandler, 2008, 331).

The fourth concept is code that is associated with the transmission of meaning in Semiotics. It is a series of contracts in a communication to decode a sign. The codes are intricate patterns that all members of a society or culture need to learn it. A code is a set of processes that users, who live in a cultural context, know it (Chandler, 2008, p. 222).

Theorists have been made different categories for codes. From The speech codes to codes related to physical appearance, facial expressions and look and codes related to fashion, merchandise, clothing and so on. Codes are categorized signs. For example, the way of looking, in different cultures has different meanings. And people, who live in different cultures, understand different meaning from one mode of looking. The role of codes in interpreting the signs is indicating.

Semiotics approach to the place, like other sign systems is a comprehensive approach to meaning. Semiotics takes all components of urban as signs that are intended to convey a message. Broadbent says: "All buildings are more or less the semantic implications. Each building evokes special meaning in the mind of the viewer, even the

architect likes it or not (Broadbent, 2001, p. 121) . this indicates that every building, regardless of what the planners intended to convey would have their meaning in user's eye.

It should be considered that comparing architecture as a sign system to the literature; the difference is that in the language each word at time only has one meaning. But in a place a broad range of senses, different messages are received (Broadbent, 2001, pp. 122 and 124). The complexity and variety of signs in the city are much more evident.

The study of three approaches shows that:

From the Lynch point of view, identity and structure have a significant role in meaning of places. The Identity belongs to a location or an event. The Structure is about the sense of orientation in space and time. On the other hand opportunity to find the meaning is supported by harmonic functions and forms.

So if a place has its own identity, people can find their own way through it, the function of the place is clear for users and the functions matches the forms, then this place can be meaningful in lynch's eye.

Lynch takes meaning as an aspect of the place. For him, meaning belongs to the environment and less dependent to the user.

In Rapoport's view, place is full of references. These references have meaning, according to the culture and environment (context) and categorized into three types of fixed, semi-fixed and non-fixed elements. According to Rapoport, semi-fixed and non-fixed elements containing more hints about the meaning of environment.

For Rapoport, meaning of the place is more related to users and how they use space rather than place and associated components and elements. Since the semi-fixed and non-fixed elements are considered as dynamic elements, it can be said that meaning is a dynamic issue and so can change over time and via its component changes.

Meaning\views	Lynch's	Rapopot's	Semiotics
Place	City shape	Communication	Communication
Elements	Identity/Structure	Cues	Signs
Way of conveying	Transparency	Context	Text

Fig. 4. Considering all three views

In Semiotics view, meaning of environment is transmitted in the form of signs. These signs are decoded due to the structures and texts (contexts) in which they objectify. So if the signs change, the meaning of the environment will change. In this view, the meaning is a very dynamic attitude.

On the other hand, in Semiotics meaning is neither of the components and characteristics of the environment, but is the people's perception of the environment. The meaning of any environment placed in the user's mind and this shows that the meaning is not belonging to the place. On the other hand the dependence of meaning to the user's

mind also raises the importance of the meaning of individual and collective meaning.

6. Results

As seen in nonverbal communication and Semiotics, meaning is depending on cultural issues and in order to understand it, people get to know the messages that are transmitted through communication.

The concept of the structure in Semiotics can be compared with the culture that Rapoport refers to. Culture is a structure. Rapoport says that references outside of culture, does not make sense to people. When the cultural structure changes, unfamiliar people to the new structure, are not able to receive the meaning.

Based on the views of Semiotics and non-verbal approach can be said: design in order to have meaning, must move in a direction which is primarily based on the culture and mentality of the people.

Lynch has a macro perspective, but the nonverbal and Semiotics approach to the smallest details in the environment and meaning. In two last views, Meaning is not a parcel that is deposited in and be received by the people and therefore is not the place property, yet all parts of the environment could be consisted of messages or the meanings.

Also, it can be said that the views of Rapoport and Semiotics have more similarities and are about to know about the mind of users, Lynch's view is more physical and more dependent on the place and characteristics of it. So the hypothesis that there are commonalities between different perspectives on the meaning, in the case of three selective approach of this research is rejected. Although there are commonalities between the two approaches, but the third approach is completely different perspective.

6. Conclusion

Meaning due the three approaches studied in this Article is a changing part of place, so it can't be attached to place by placemakers. Although the meaning itself is not changing easily in people's mind, but it is not an element of the environment, so not a physical quality.

Being a non-physical quality does not mean that placemakers can ignore this quality in their work, contrariwise They must think how to add this invisible quality to the environment. Although meaning can't be added to place by using specific elements, placemakers need to consider meaning in plan and designing the place, since it affects human life. On the other hand People are always find the meaning of place, and if they couldnot find the meaning, they would attach their own meaning to place. So it can't be ignored or omitted in design process.

Before selecting a meaning for place, it is nessecery to know how people can find and understand it. Considering people and their culture, mindset and codes are important in preparing the meaning of place.

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