# DESIGNING MEANINGFUL LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE THROUGH REVITALIZING CHARACTER OF PLACE: THE CASE OF HAILE SELASSIE STREET, PIAZZA, ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA

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**Abstract**

A "place" is determined by the relationship between its physical setting and its users, by the human activities and events that occur there and by the meanings it holds for its users. Places retain their unique identity by depicting their own sense of character and by providing psychological and functional meaning. The character of a place, understood as its general atmosphere, increases place attachment by creating an emotional bond with its users, thereby promoting vitality, involvement and a sense of responsibility. Thus, places can be systematically converted into landscape design schemes through the revitalization of their contextual character. This study aims to investigate the factors that comprise the genuine character of Haile Selassie Street, a commercial thoroughfare that holds historical significance for Addis Ababa. The investigation aspires to uncover the street's unique qualities in terms of its principal character, based on the concepts of "genius of place," "place identity," "essence of place" and "character of place," and taking into account history and time, physical setting, religion and culture, meaning, society, nature, memory, function and activity. Results suggest that the history, memory and functional context of a place express its genuine character and create the place attachment missing from modern landscape architecture. The methods used for data collection are literature reviews, on-site documentation, visual assessment and questionnaire survey.

**Keywords**: Character, history, landscape architecture, meaning, place

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In Addis Ababa nowadays, the "revitalization" of inner-city spaces occurs inattentively in local development plans, thereby causing the erosion of the meaning and character of place. Without the consideration of place identity, this kind of haphazard urban development and spatial design could completely erase the value and meaning of place (Antrop 2005). Therefore, designing places with meaning is essential to landscape practices. Consequently, landscape architects have gradually begun to develop a revitalization philosophy of place. Landscape architects should play a major role in collaboration with other specialists in order to discover character of place and to conserve and embed meaning for future progress. A number of authors at various times have mentioned different approaches to defining meaning in places and in landscape architecture in general. To discover the meaning of a place, this paper reviews the concepts "genius of place," "place identity," "essence of place" and "character of place."

To create a meaningful environment, it is necessary to have an understanding of a place's historical, cultural and ecological context. This knowledge would take into account the history of the people and their accomplishments

within the same framework as their comprehensive view of the natural world.. Therefore, the role of landscape architects in creating a meaningful landscape is to convert a space into a place where meaning can transfer to the audience without intellect. Every place has its own character and unique meaning. Schulz (1991) argues that "knowing the true characteristic of a place will help us to create a meaningful environment." Hence, before beginning the design process, any place identity of the location or its character should be discovered and acknowledged. The goal of this paper is to recognize the features of a place that are significant in defining its character for creating a meaningful environment within its own context.

## 2. MEANING IN PLACE AND LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

Place is an organized world of meaning (Tuan 1977). It is defined as an entity that relies upon the aspects of meaning, physical setting and relative activity (Stokols & Shumaker 1981). Such aspects as landscape, religion, community, memory and residence influence the sense of place and define a context in which all these layers are associated and interdependent. In this way, places become centers of established meanings and values. Tuan (1977) asserted that the meaning of a place is defined through the emotional bond people form with physical features and decoded based on their roles, experiences and expectations. In addition, Relph's (1976) view of place, whether it is relatively large or small, is described as an interaction among physical setting, activity and meaning.

Like place, landscape is an outcome of interaction between humans and their environment. According to Treib's (1995) definition, landscape is an essence of place and is formed based on human experiences, the meaning of which is derived from the combination of history, ethics, values and affect. Landscape does not emerge spontaneously but is created by human activities. Therefore, landscape is a man-made artefact with associated cultural meanings and values. According to Treib (1995) view, meanings are not designer notions; meanings can be earned rather than granted. Meaning will vary from place to place according to the various cultures, history, life experiences and nature experiences of users. Further, Olin (1988) classified meaning in landscape according to two features: a) natural or evolutionary meaning, related to the aspect of the landscape as a setting for reflection or expression for survival and perpetuation and b) invented meaning, which encompasses work and expresses the art of landscape design. Olin (1988, p.159) He asserted that "landscape is not verbal construction" yet landscape can express certain things and possess symbols that refer to ideas. Not all theory regarding meaning in landscape is associated with pleasure. Jane Gillette wrote an article "Can Gardens Mean?" maintaining that landscapes are incapable of expressing meaning and that gardens are the only source of pleasure (Gillette 2005). She believes that the emergence of the notion of landscape was due to postmodern-era critics and the current taste of narrations. Thus, according to different viewpoints derived from the literature, the concepts of place and landscape are considered to be similar.

### 2.1. Genius loci: spirit of a place

The genius loci describes the latent atmosphere of place and the quality of its environment. Genius loci reveal the particularities of a place and its profundity to achieve meaning in landscape design (Treib 1995). Certain places and localities have an attractions which gave us special 'feel' of indefinable sense of well being. Spirit of a place is a must in landscape design. This is because the importance of the visual for, although we perceives with other senses, memory, intellect and imagination (Jakle 1987). Initially, a place conditions are reflected in landscape design which later demonstrates its value, meaning, activities and human purpose. Reviving the character of a place is an approach to achieve the genius of place.

### 2.2. Place identity

Lynch (1960) defines place identity as a quality that provides a place with its individuality, or that distinguishes it from other places, and thereby serves as the basis for its recognition. Therefore, each place has its own unique quality, which is identifiable. Physical setting, activities and meaning are the significant raw materials that make up place identity (Relph 1976). These elements are always interrelated, resulting in a collective perception of place and a proposed social image.

### 2.3. The essence of place

The essence of a place is perceived as a profound center of human existence. The multidimensional phenomenon of a place and the analysis of its various features, such as location, landscape and personal dependence, create its essence (Relph 1976). Therefore, one can discover the basic meaning of a place through the examination of both the community that occupies it and the community's mundane experiences at that location.

### 2.4. Character of a place

History, culture, event, memories are the factors that define the character of place (Relph 1976). Discovering the meaning of a place can determine the genuine character of a place. Specific character of place refers to the general atmosphere of an attribute. According to Schultz's (1991) explanation, character of a place can be categorized as human, physical and emotional, the last of which is belief and value. In making a place there are two functions: a "system of orientation" and "identification." These functions are important in distinguishing the character of a place, and help create a sense of place. Shamai & Ilatov (2005), also, maintain that the combination of location,

landscape and personal involvement can create a sense of place.

### 2.5. A comparison: character of a place, genius loci, place identity, and essence of place

Genius loci, place identity, essence of place, and character of place are interdependent parts in the exploration of meaning in a place. All these aspects have essentially the same goal with regard to a vital sense of place. These approaches relate to one another, moreover, it is noted that human experiences and historical importance plays important role in all descriptions. Above all, character and identity of a place are highly elaborated in all approaches.

Genius loci is a statement of the particularities of a place, which include all the values and human activities in that location. Similarly, place identity is comparable to social identity in that it has to do with people's engagement with the physical world. Essence of a place describes the atmosphere of the place by defining its place identity and its genius loci. It is, of course, recognized that human activity plays a significant role in all the concepts. Jackson (1994) asserted that genius loci has allied to the concept of restoring the character of a place. Therefore, through the exploration of values, activities and beliefs of users, character of place emerges as an important feature that highlights place identity and principal meaning. Character of place facilitates the recognition of place identity and strengthens the relationship between human and place. It is this relationship, of people and place with the physical environment, that establishes the identities and meanings of a place. Therefore, the four concepts of genius loci, place identity, essence of place and character of place are vital to declaring character of a place using the factors history and time, physical setting, society, nature, meaning, memory, location, activity and function, religion and culture.

## 3. STUDY AREA

### 3.1. Haile Selassie Street, Piazza, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: A Historical Overview

Zwede (1986), in his article "Early *Sefers* of Addis Ababa," mentioned that the two nodes around which the city of Addis Ababa city first grew were the palace, as a political center, and St. George's Church, Piazza, as a religious center. Piazza itself later gained cultural and commercial importance. By the 1930s, when the Italians invaded the city of Addis Ababa, they had come up with a scheme to commercialize and retain the centrality of what is now Haile Selassie Street by giving it the name Corso Victoria Emanuel. It was subsequently renamed after the late king. As a consequence of this emphasis, the street's function became that of bustling commercial center, and its activity involved different types of business people converging to ply their trades. Additionally, the Armenians and Greeks encouraged local business and added their own commerce. Thus, modern shopping, with its diversity of function and activity, was born in the city center of Addis Ababa and remained a distinctive feature of the quarter. After the liberation, the predominance and centrality of Piazza, especially Haile Selassie Street as a modernist urban landmark, was perpetuated, with the architectural design of the surrounding buildings retaining the Italian style. This physical reflection of the historical chain events played a significant role in giving a special memory to the place. Piazza, which has been immortalized in many popular songs and poems nostalgically harking back to the "good old days," reflected the commercial activity that is inherent to an urban settlement, and thus constituted the urban soul of the city and the nation at large (Zwede 1986).

### 3.2. Case study: Haile Selassie Street

The study was conducted on a portion of the Piazza neighborhood in Addis Ababa. Among the most important thoroughfares in the city, Haile Selassie Street is a street known for its rapid development and historical significance. The street is bordered by a number of highly significant historical and religious buildings. To explore the main character of the place, this study analyzed all the layers that comprise the site's character, including history, culture, location, society and meaning. These layers establish the character of the place, through finding balance between function and meaning, between history and the future, between conservation and commerce and between the city and the citizen.

## 4. METHOD

### 4.1. Evaluating the character of a place

According to the above discussions, the concept of character of place can be defined as people's subjective perception of the environment and their feelings toward a place. Significant research on discovering character of place has been conducted by well-known theorists, among them Relph (1976), Steele (1981), Yi-Fu Tuan (1977), Norberg-Schulz (1991) and Jackson (1994), and has concluded that places are centers of felt value. The reviewed literature revealed a set of factors from a number of authors that contribute to the identification of the character of a place. These are history and time, physical setting, religion, culture, meaning, nature, memory, activity and function, society and location.

Based on these factors, this study evaluated Haile Selassie Street to discover its genuine character, which determines the relevance of the street. The identity of the street is an important factor in meaningful landscape design. These factors becomes tools to help identify and specify each of the qualities of the street. Given the historical importance of the street, there are many examples in literature of theorists having recorded perceptions and memories of the place. The physical characteristics of each quality were observed and analyzed according to

their importance.

For substantiation of the results obtained, a questionnaire survey on people's perception of the place was conducted.

### 4.2. Research method

Based on the conceptual framework developed in the above, the research focused on identifying the character of Haile Selassie Street. The current condition of the physical attributes was examined to establish the relevance of the attributes to the historical importance of the street. These physical features, which have been proven to affect culture and tradition, were evaluated, offering a tangible input to the study. The results of people's perception contributed a solution that would considerably enhance the quality of the street for the future development.

### 5. RESULTS

The findings of the study of the two phases of the examination are discussed below.

### 5.1. Visual assessment / site observation
### 5.1.1. Physical character

The physical characteristics and attributes of a place not only define the kind of setting, but they also contribute to the perceived meaning or sense of a place. These important elements are size, scale, proportion, diversity, distance, texture, ornaments, color, smell and all visual variety (Steele 1981). These physical features are symbolic of the creation of meaning and conceptions, and also safeguard the character of a place. Most of the Haile Selassie Street frontage consists of historic buildings. These structures, with their distinctive architectural characteristics, remain in memory for a long time. In addition, identifiable buildings in terms of their form, shape, texture and color act as landmarks, or points of orientation and give identity to the street as a whole.

### 5.1.2. Society

Relph (1976) asserted that the relationship between society and place is very strong. This relationship plays important roles in strengthening street identity and promoting a sense of place. Haile Selassie Street has high socialization activity: located in the heart of the city, the street is thronged with people, who use the site for shopping, outdoor dining, tourism and residence.

### 5.1.3. Nature

Protecting nature is essential, both in the city and countryside (Ian, 1969). The natural forms of a site can contribute to the maintenance and manipulation of existing place and also to creating a new place. Therefore, protecting nature means to let it be in its own essence (Relph 1976). Haile Selassie Street, a linearly elongated street without landscape features, received a low value for nature as recorded during the questionnaire survey.

### 5.1.4. Religion and culture

Linkage through religious and secular pilgrimage, and a site's use in cultural events, can help to give a place its unique character. This kind of place attachment, of people to a location, is important in that it strengthens the identity, beliefs and values of society (Relph 1976). Thus, in promoting the essence of a place and creating a sense of place, social interaction is the main influence.

Even though Haile Selassie Street is close to neighboring historical religious places and even has a church that fronts it, no strong attachment has formed between the street and the religious institutions.

### 5.1.5. Activity and function

Relph (1976) identifies activities and functions that can be distinguished as being creative or destructive elements in creating a place. These creative or destructive elements can be seen as a considerably important factor in establishing the identity of a particular place. Haile Selassie street is an active commercial street with well-defined boundaries, and is legible, with strong linkages to other streets. As mentioned above, the street is always filled with shoppers, tourists and people simply hanging out.

### 5.1.6. History and time

Relph (1976) denoted that time is usually a part of our daily experience of places, and experience is dependent upon the constant changes in time. Thus, places express history and time as future hope. Due to the fact that the characteristics of a place are discovered over time, the character of a location can be an existential facility in creating a meaningful place. Haile Selassie Street represents a very meaningful historical accomplishment for the country as well for the nation. The street was profoundly affected by the brief confrontation with the Italians. In its architectural influences, one can sense a need for an elite class during the country's time of political destabilization. Later, when the Italians were defeated, the street became an important landmark for those liberated.

### 5.1.7. Memory

According to Schulz (1991), places are spaces that are felt, understood and blended with memories. Places are sensed according to their setting, landscape, and routines and other personal experiences. Thus, a place that affects our memories through experience is a place that holds a memory behind it. Haile Selassie holds a significant memory of its past experiences. .

### 5.1.8. Meaning

Meaning as a cognitive factor refers to the perceptual and physiological aspects of an environmental experience perceived by people (Relph,1976). Therefore, past experience, culture, beliefs, personality, knowledge, background, memories and location influence the perceived character of a place. Haile Selassie Street is considered to hold the soul and essence of the nation's most important historical events; for that reason, it is called the miniature of the capital.

Analysis of the site elaborated upon the perception and memory of the site according to history, culture, meaning, function and the role of traditional and religious aspects. The table below lists the factors discovered about the site from the survey along with their context.

| | Factors | | Context |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | History and time | | Node around which the city of Addis Ababa first grew |
| 2. | Physical | Form | Italian, Armenian and Greek architectural design along the street |
| | | Material | |
| | | Texture | |
| 4. | Religion & culture | | No strong bond between cultural and religious conceptions |
| 5. | Meaning | | Called a miniature of the capital, the soul and mirror of its essence (memory) and history |
| 6. | Nature | | Few existing natural forms |
| 7. | Memory | | Immortalized in many popular songs and oral poetry: liberation of Ethiopians from the Italians |
| 8. | Activity and function | | The first modern shopping street in Ethiopia/currently an active commercial street |
| 9. | Location | | Geographically located in the city center |

**Table 1.** Evaluation of factors contributing to the identification of character of Haile Selassie Street

### 5.2. Questionnaire Survey

The respondents of Haile Selassie Street survey consisted of 55 percent 18- to 30-year-olds and 45 percent over 30 of both genders. The survey was done based on the factors contributing to the identification of the character of the place. The survey instrument was circulated among local residents and visitors of the place.The rating analysis was given a 5-point Likert scale as follows: 1–1.99 = Very Low; 2–2.99 = Low; 3–3.99 = Medium; 4–4.5 = High; 4.5–5 = Very High. One hundred respondents were selected randomly to participate in the survey. Questions were asked to participants about the history, function, meaning, memory, culture and religious activities of the street. According to the results obtained by the survey, the street has important historical meaning, memory and activities and functions. People's perception of the factors identifying character of place is presented in **Figure 1**.
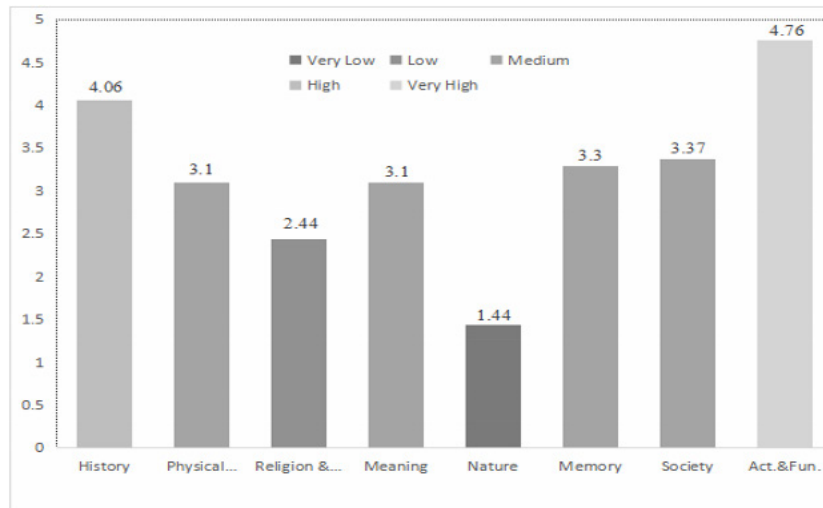
**Figure 1.** Street characteristics based on the tools developed. Source: author

### 6. DISCUSSION

According to the analysis and result, it is clear that history, memory, physical factors, and activities and functions are among the most important factors relevant to street character. As mentioned above, the street and surrounding neighborhood hold significant historical meaning for the country. Hence this important, centrally located neighborhood can be geographically advantageous to the city's tourist industry. In the questionnaires, the older participants and residents easily recalled the history and memory of the place; on the other hand, the younger generation, tourists and shoppers who visit this place expressed the current existing situation of the street. Haile Selassie Street is known for its active shopping center aligned along both sides of the street. With the unique architectural designs of the buildings that survive along its frontage, the street left a memory in every survey respondent.

This research shows that the combination of memory, physical settings and history can be understood as a symbol of identity for this street and its function and activity as a "modern shopping street." Therefore, revitalizing the Haile Selassie Street by declaring its own contextual identity will help in creating meaningful landscape design.

### 7.CONCLUSION

Exploration of meaning in landscape architecture and place has been a consistently researched topic. Different authors have made numerous points on this topic. This article reviewed concepts such as genius of place, place identity, essence of place, and character of place, which join together to create a common meaning. In sustaining the character of place, it is essential to study these different factors in different contexts. Therefore, historical, cultural, memory and other societal identifiers were considered in discovering the identity of a place. Analyzing a place to revealing its character is the main concept in achieving meaningful landscape design. As indicated by the case study, history, memory and function of the context are strongly manifested in the diversity, colonial influence and multi-functional activities. Therefore, the revitalization of places should respond to their environmental identity, where social-being of communities and their valuable memory can grow accordingly. Yet these values are under the threat of modernization development and often disappear during the process of urban regeneration, causing a condition devoid of significance. Therefore, it is important to understand how place identity, through an examination of social, physical and psychological aspects, will imbue the future with sense of of the past.

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