


## Revealing city identity through a semiotic approach: analysis of city elements

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Keywords:</b> City Identity, Architectural Semiotics, City Elements, Green Open Space</p>	<p>There is generalization and uniformity in the form of development and visuals of the city, so that the city becomes increasingly foreign to society, especially in recognizing and exploring the potential of one's identity to fulfill one's life needs. A city as a complex entity is not only a physical collection of buildings, but also a system of meaning that can be described through a semiotic approach. This research aims to reveal the identity of a city through analyzing city elements using semiotic theory as a basis. A semiotic approach allows us to understand the way symbols and signs within a city contribute to the formation of its identity. The results of this research reveal that city architecture is not just a physical structure, but rather a reflection of the city's identity which is formed through careful planning, taking into account historical, local, rarity, socio-cultural, aesthetic and harmony values. Green and non-green open spaces in urban areas display various forms that reflect social interaction, providing a place for people to communicate, share experiences and build relationships. Apart from its ecological function, open space also has an important role in the social, architectural and economic aspects of cities. Thus, this research highlights the complexity of city elements and symbols in shaping identity as well as the role of open spaces as centers of social interaction, providing insights for holistic and sustainable urban planning.</p>
<p>This is an open access article under the <a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/">CC BY-NC</a> license</p> 	<p><b>Corresponding Author:</b> Ayub Muktiono Krisnadwipayana University, Jakarta, Indonesia <a href="mailto:ayubmuktiono@unkris.ac.id">ayubmuktiono@unkris.ac.id</a></p>

### INTRODUCTION

Each city has a unique identity, which reflects the combination of the culture of its people and the characteristics of its physical environment. Community culture becomes the soul and character of the city, while the physical environment determines its body or physical structure (Ziyae, 2018). This analogy can be likened to a coin with two sides that complement each other. If the character of a city is strong, then people who come to that city tend to be absorbed and immersed in the city's identity. The city's identity becomes so strong that outside influences are difficult to change (Proshansky, 1978). A city that has a distinctive character is able to provide a unique experience for its residents and visitors. Immigrant communities don't just stay, but they contribute to enriching and strengthening the character of the city (Belabas et al., 2020).

These unique characteristics not only include cultural aspects, but also values, traditions and ways of life that are an inseparable part of the daily lives of city people. A strong city identity creates a sense of pride and a sense of belonging among its residents (Stephenson, 2008). Moreover, when a city has a strong character, its influence is not limited to its own territory. The city has the potential to influence the surrounding area, both in terms of economy, culture and social development. As a center of activity and innovation, cities can be a source of inspiration for the surrounding area (Rondinelli et al., 1998). The development of a city also needs to be balanced between maintaining its identity and being open to external influences. Healthy urban dynamics is when a city is able to combine cultural heritage with new innovations, creating harmony between tradition and development (Ratiu, 2013).

The concept of "local genius" in city development reflects the ability of a city to maintain its unique character and identity, and is even able to have an influence on the surrounding regions and cities (Krzyżanowska, N. (2016). This term refers to a city's success in combining its culture, traditions and local characteristics with modern developments that are taking place. In this context, building a city is not only limited to physical development, but also the formation of the soul of its people (Kavaratzis, 2004). The success of city development can be seen not only from strong physical infrastructure, but also from the resilience and sustainability of cultural values passed down from generation to generation (Montgomery, 1998).

As stated by Friedmann (1999), community mental resilience has a crucial role in city sustainability. If the people's soul is fragile, then gradually the city will also experience fragility. On the other hand, if the spirit of the people is strong and determined, the city will become a dynamic and competitive center of life. Therefore, city development must involve active community participation in maintaining and maintaining local values. In this way, the city can continue to grow and develop without losing its cultural essence and identity (Serageldin et al., 2001). By maintaining the strength of the community spirit, a city can be an inspiration for the surrounding area, creating positive synergy between the city and the surrounding area in supporting sustainable development (Pezzoli, 1997).

When someone visits a place or city, the desire to feel and discover the characteristics of that city becomes very important. The characteristics of a place reflect its identity and attraction that makes it unique in the eyes of visitors (Avraham, 2004). A city that is able to highlight its characteristics, whether in cultural, artistic, culinary or architectural aspects, can create an unforgettable experience for every visitor. That way, tourists and newcomers not only come to see, but also feel the special atmosphere and characteristics of the city (Liu & Chen, 2007).

Cities, as complex entities, go beyond mere physical collections of buildings and infrastructure. As a repository of values, meanings and symbols, cities form a system containing cultural narratives, history and collective identity (Boyer 1994). A semiotic approach opens a window to unravel this complexity, allowing us to read the signs hidden within the fabric of the city's streets, architecture and public spaces (Jaworsky & Thurlow, 2010). By detailing the elements of the city as signs, we can interpret the messages

contained within them, opening up a deeper understanding of the character and identity of the city as a dynamic entity that continues to develop. Thus, the city is not only a physical form, but also a reflection of the diversity, values and meaning produced by the people who inhabit it (Papen, 2015).

This research states that its main aim is to reveal the identity of a city through in-depth analysis of city elements, and the approach taken uses semiotic theory as the basis for analysis. By utilizing semiotic theory, this research aims to explore the meaning behind the symbols and signs in the city, showing how these elements contribute to the process of forming a city's identity. A semiotic approach is the key to understanding the complexity of messages contained in architecture, symbols and urban spaces, opening new insights into how society and the environment interact with each other in the process of identifying and interpreting cities as living and dynamic entities.

## **Literature Review**

### **City Identity**

Cities have the ability to create unique or distinctive characteristics that involve various aspects, such as business centers, cultural riches, artistic activities, or advances in science and technology (science and technology). This uniqueness does not just appear, but is based on a prominent character or identity that has been had since the beginning (Muktiono 2018). Cities that are able to embrace and develop their unique identity, capitalizing on local history and richness, tend to become well-known and appreciated. Its fame is not solely due to the label or brand attached to its name, but is the result of a long and continuous process of forming the city's identity which involves the active participation of its citizens (Haapala, 2003).

As highlighted by Dovey et al. (2012), a city's fame cannot be reduced to promotional elements or empty slogans produced solely for image purposes. On the other hand, an identity that grows from a long series of history and culture has more attraction and power in shaping the character of a city. A city's identity cannot actually be built but is formed by itself. City identity is formed from the understanding and meaning of the "image" of something that exists or has existed/is attached to the city or the recognition of physical objects (buildings and other physical elements) and non-physical objects (social activities) which are formed over time. Historical aspects and the recognition of the "image" captured by city residents are important in interpreting the city's identity or regional image (Lochtefeld, 2010)

### **Semiotics in Architecture**

Semiotics, as a science that studies signs and symbols, makes a significant contribution to the understanding of architectural elements. Eco (1996) define semiotics as a science that allows us to identify how signs and symbols operate in various contexts. In the architectural context, there are three categories of relationships between signs and elements in architecture, namely syntax, pragmatics and semantics. Somov (2001) emphasizes that, in contrast to literary fields that emphasize "language words," in architecture, the primary focus is on "visual and spatial elements."

According to Gawlikowska (2013), the concept of semiotics in architecture opens a window for reading and understanding architectural elements as a visual language. Syntax discusses the cooperation, combination and arrangement between signs that form the visual structure of a building. Pragmatics, another side of architectural semiotics, discusses the relationship between signs and their users. How the signs interact and adapt to building users. Meanwhile, semantics explores the relationship between signs and the reality they express, explaining their meaning in an architectural context. Architectural semiotics helps decipher the visual and spatial language of an architectural work. It's not just about aesthetics or visual beauty, but also about how these elements speak and interact with the observer (Kiroff, 2002)

### City Elements

Traditional cities, in general, are built following a series of elements that reflect cosmological, governmental and ritual values. Traditional city structures are often characterized by the presence of a virtual axis, a cosmic mountain, and the division of space on the basis of sacred and profane levels (Chizhevsky, 2019). In addition, traditional inner-city settlements are often grouped by gender and social strata. However, over time, the social and religious values and rules that shape traditional cities have begun to shift due to technological and economic influences (Krase, 2016).

Technological and economic developments have brought the concept of "form follows function," where the design or planning of a city places more emphasis on its functional aspects (Burger & Meijers, 2012). This concept is considered more practical, rational, and in accordance with society's functional needs. City elements include architecture, open space, symbols, and infrastructure. Through semiotic analysis of these elements, we can identify the messages they contain and how these messages interact to shape the city's identity.

## METHOD

This research adopts a qualitative approach involving observation techniques, interviews and document analysis (Gerring, 2017). By using this method, researchers can gain a deep understanding of the observed phenomena. Observations were carried out to obtain visual and contextual data directly from the research location. Interviews were used to obtain direct views and understanding from key informants involved in city life and dynamics. Document analysis was conducted to explore relevant written records and information. The research location selection process was based on the diversity of the city and its unique characteristics. This aims to ensure adequate representation of the variety of city elements that are the focus of the research. By choosing diverse locations, this research seeks to cover various city contexts and dynamics that can provide in-depth insights. Data collected from observations, interviews and document analysis were then analyzed using semiotic concepts. A semiotic approach is used to decipher the signs and symbols in the city, thereby enabling researchers to understand the meaning behind the city's elements. Thus, a qualitative approach and semiotic concepts are used as solid analytical tools to explore a deep understanding of the city's identity and the way its symbols contribute to the formation of the city's identity.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Architecture as a Marker of City Identity

City architecture is not just a physical structure, but is also a manifestation of the city's identity which is mapped through a careful planning process. When designing city architecture, city planners not only consider functional aspects, but also uphold the historical value of the city itself. The history of the city is a central point in efforts to preserve and conserve historic buildings, which are an inseparable part of the face of the city (Sklair, 2011).

Through careful architectural design, cities not only create structures that meet practical needs, but also respect and celebrate the cultural heritage that has shaped them. This process involves strategic decisions in preserving and preserving historic buildings as an integral part of the balance between past and present. In this way, city architecture not only becomes a reflection of physical continuity, but also becomes a visual narrative that takes the viewer through the historical journey told by each standing structure. Therefore, urban architecture not only creates physical space, but also becomes a vital link between the past, present and future of the city itself (Hauge, 2007).

Urban architectural design is not only about planning physical structures, but also paying attention to how humans respond and interact with the urban environment, especially in the context of visual appearance. Human sensory influences on urban architectural design include responses to aesthetics, layout, and visual elements that form the face of the city. Aspects of a city's visual appearance are crucial in forming the impression and identity of the city itself. The design of urban areas must consider how people see, feel and experience their physical environment. Aesthetic factors, building proportions, spatial layout and other artistic elements are important elements in creating an attractive city atmosphere and providing a positive visual experience.

The role of aesthetics in urban architectural design not only impacts beauty, but also creates a pleasant space to occupy. Human sensory responses to urban design can influence people's psychological and emotional well-being, creating strong emotional bonds between individuals and the cities in which they live. By understanding humans' sensory responses to a city's physical environment, urban designers can create architectural designs that enrich the visual experience, improve quality of life, and build a strong city identity. Thus, urban architectural design does not only consider physical function, but also seeks to create a city that is beautiful, comfortable, and in accordance with the needs and preferences of humans who inhabit and interact in the city space.

In an effort to explore and preserve city architecture which is an element that forms city identity, the mental mapping method is an effective tool. By doing mental mapping, we can explore the mental images stored in the minds of city residents regarding the existence of their city. This approach allows us to understand the perceptions, values and meanings contained in the physical structure and architecture of a city which is an integral part of its identity.

According to Amin & Graham (1997), a city's identity has deep roots in local culture, and emerges from the bonds of continuity between the past, present and future. Mental

mapping becomes a window that opens up space to capture the stories, heritage and values inherent in city architecture. By understanding how city residents view their city, we can open a richer discussion about the meaning and role of architecture in shaping city identity.

Mental mapping does not just identify physical elements, but also explores the emotional and cultural meaning attached to every corner of the city. This process provides a strong foundation for efforts to preserve a city's architecture, as it provides a comprehensive picture of the values to be preserved and passed on from generation to generation. By caring for and understanding the diversity of people's mental images of cities, architectural preservation becomes not just a physical task, but also an effort to care for and enrich the cultural heritage that forms the core of a city's identity.

Based on the results of the author's study, the marking of city architecture can be seen from six assessments of city architecture which include: Historical value; Local architectural values/traditional architecture; Rarity/archaeological value; Socio-Cultural Values/Religiosity; Aesthetic Value Analysis; and Alignment Value Analysis

Historical value is an important criterion in assessing city architecture because it reflects the historical traces that shape the character and identity of the city. Urban architecture that contains historical value often includes historic buildings, monuments, or other structures that have historical significance. This research places historical values as an important foothold in understanding the essence of the city and passing on cultural heritage to future generations.

Furthermore, local or traditional architectural values play a role in strengthening the identity of a city. Architecture that reflects local or traditional characteristics adds to the city's cultural richness and establishes a connection with local heritage. In marking city architecture, the existence and preservation of local architecture is a key aspect that is appreciated as a form of appreciation for local uniqueness.

Rarity or archaeological value implies the continued importance of archaeological structures or sites that can provide deep insight into past civilizations. This marking includes efforts to preserve and understand artifacts, buildings or structures that are silent witnesses to the city's historical journey, giving a rich and varied time dimension to the city's architecture.

In addition, socio-cultural values or religiosity details the relationship between city architecture and social and cultural values, including religious aspects. Buildings of worship, sacred places, and architectural elements that reflect cultural and religious values are important markers in creating social and spiritual harmony in the urban context.

Aesthetic value analysis is an important factor in assessing the visual appeal of city architecture. Beauty, design harmony and structural aesthetics can provide a unique identity and highlight the positive image of a city. Urban architectural markings must also consider aesthetic values that provide visual appeal and beauty for city residents and visitors.

Finally, harmony value analysis is an important criterion in assessing how the architectural elements of a city are interconnected and form a harmonious unity. Designations that consider harmony assess the degree to which a city's architecture creates

spaces that are balanced, coherent and flow organically, creating a comfortable and integrated environment.

By utilizing the six values of urban architectural marking, a comprehensive and holistic evaluation framework has been formed. This evaluation takes into account historical, local, rarity, socio-cultural, aesthetic and harmony values, creating an in-depth picture of a city's rich and varied characteristics and identity. Through this approach, urban architecture is not just a physical structure, but also a marker that reflects heritage, unique local culture, and the balance maintained in urban planning and development. By understanding and appreciating these values, we can maintain the diversity and richness of the city's identity, making it an entity that lives, develops and is harmoniously connected to the heritage of the past, the needs of the present and the hopes of the future.

### **City design site analysis symbols**

Site analysis symbols in urban design are a form of graphic representation that is the main tool for urban designers and planners. Using these symbols, they can represent the various features and elements present in a location, including physical, social, economic and environmental characteristics. These symbols play an important role in presenting clear and comprehensive information about the complexity of a site, allowing urban designers to better understand its context (Mitchell, 2005).

The application of site analysis symbols is not just a graphical tool; more than that, these symbols help city planners identify the challenges and opportunities that exist in a location. By utilizing these graphic representations, urban planners and designers can make more precise and informed design decisions, considering the various aspects that play a role in shaping the structure and character of a city. In this way, the site analysis symbol becomes a visual bridge that connects understanding the complexity of a location with holistic and integrated urban design.

In the context of site analysis, various symbols can be used to represent various elements that build the character of a location. First of all, symbols can be directed to reflect the physical features of the site, such as topography which can be represented through contour symbols or elevation lines. Vegetation can be represented with tree or forest symbols, while buildings can be identified through architectural symbols that characterize existing physical structures (Nas, 2011).

Symbols can also be used to describe the social and economic characteristics of a site. For example, population density can be represented by dot symbols or colors indicating population levels in different areas. Income levels can be represented through color scales or symbols that reflect income categories. Symbols can also be used to highlight the cultural diversity of an area, depicting the social complexity of the people who inhabit that location.

Additionally, site analysis symbols can focus on the environmental characteristics of a location. The existence of natural resources, such as rivers or forests, can be represented by special symbols. The level of air or water pollution can be represented through a color scale or symbols that characterize the level of pollution. Symbols can also be used to warn of

potential natural disasters, such as floods or earthquakes, to assist in risk mitigation planning.

By understanding and using a variety of site analysis symbols, urban planners and designers can read and interpret diverse information more effectively. These symbols provide an opportunity to depict the complexity of a location in a clear and interpretable way, guiding sustainable and informed urban planning and development processes.

Site analysis symbols function as a key to open the door to revealing a city's identity by presenting a visual language that clearly describes the character and identity of a location. First, symbols provide an in-depth understanding of the physical, social, economic and environmental characteristics of a city. By using appropriate symbols, complex information can be conveyed in an easy-to-understand manner, providing a foundation for detailing the complexities of a location.

Second, symbols play an important role in effective communication between urban designers and planners, stakeholders, and the general public. The visual language presented by symbols overcomes language barriers and facilitates the participation of various parties in discussions about the character and identity of the city. These symbols become communication tools that expand understanding between city experts and the public.

Third, site analysis symbols are able to describe the diversity of a city. From physical features to social and economic aspects, various elements can be represented through different symbols, capturing the richness and complexity of a city's identity that is difficult to express in words alone. The choice of certain symbols helps highlight the elements that are most important in the formation of a city's character.

Fourth, symbols help in identifying and prioritizing critical aspects that build a city's character. By highlighting certain symbols, urban designers can focus attention on the elements that are most vital in the development and preservation of a city's identity.

Fifth, the symbols used in site analysis provide clear guidance for making informed design decisions. These symbols help detail the aspects that must be considered and considered in the design, ensuring that the design properly reflects the identity of the city.

Sixth, by using site analysis symbols, urban designers and planners can develop a better understanding of the complexity of cities and develop design solutions that are responsive to the identity and unique needs of each location. These symbols are not only graphic tools, but also visual keys that open the door to a deep understanding of the character and identity of a city.

By using site analysis symbols, urban designers and planners have the ability to develop a deeper understanding of the complexity of cities and develop design solutions that are responsive to the identity and unique needs of each location. These symbols are not just graphic tools, but visual keys that open the door to a deep understanding of the character and identity of a city. As a visual communication tool, these symbols play an important role in opening a window into the characteristics and essence of a city, providing a basis for urban planning and design that is not only sustainable, but also informed. In this context, symbols become an effective means to guide urban designers and planners in



creating an urban environment that is not only visually beautiful, but also deeply rooted in the identity and values inherent in the city's identity.

### **Open space as a mirror of social interaction**

Open space in an urban context or a wider area displays a variety of forms, both in the form of areas or areas, and long paths, and its use is open without any building structures. In general, open space is divided into two main categories, namely green open space and non-green open space. Green open space, which often takes the form of an elongated area or group of areas, is intended for open use with an emphasis on the growth of plants, both those that grow naturally and those planted intentionally. Meanwhile, non-green open space includes urban areas that are not included in the green open space category, which can be paved land or bodies of water (Thompson, 2002).

Furthermore, in the classification of green open space, there is a subcategory in the form of private green open space. This type of open space is owned by certain institutions or individuals and its use is limited to certain groups. Examples include gardens or yards of houses or buildings owned by the public or private sector and planted with various types of plants. Private green open spaces create opportunities for individuals or institutions to enjoy natural elements within their private environment, creating a balance between busy urban life and the need for connection with nature. Thus, the concept of open space has become fundamental in city planning, accommodating people's need for interaction with nature amidst the ongoing dynamics of urban development (Vavtala et al., 2020).

The function of open space can be seen through four different aspects, making a significant contribution to various dimensions of urban life. First, from an ecological perspective, green open spaces have an important role in reducing city temperatures, reducing air pollution, preventing flooding, and improving groundwater quality. The presence of plants in open spaces not only provides coolness, but also contributes to mitigating adverse environmental impacts. The second aspect, socio-cultural, highlights that open space is not only a place for physical activity, but also functions as a space for social interaction. The recreational function and as a symbol of a cultural city is a tangible manifestation of open spaces, such as city parks, sports fields, or cemeteries. Open spaces create places for people to gather, celebrate and carry out various cultural activities.

The architectural side is the third important aspect, where open space can increase the beauty and comfort of the city. City parks, green belts, and architecturally considered design of city streets can create an aesthetic and comfortable environment for residents. Finally, from an economic perspective, well-managed green open space can be a driving force for the economy. The presence of attractive open spaces can attract visitors and city residents to participate in recreational activities, stimulate the surrounding economic sectors such as parking services, food stalls and places to eat. These economic benefits create a financially sustainable environment while keeping environmental sustainability in mind. By considering these various aspects, managing green open spaces in urban areas not only provides environmental benefits, but also forms a complex and holistic network of functions that supports sustainability, social welfare, and a balance between urban development and community needs.

Open spaces in urban contexts take various forms that reflect social interaction, providing places where people can communicate, share experiences and build relationships. First of all, city parks are a classic form of open space that facilitates social interaction. With benches, children's play areas and picnic areas, city parks create an atmosphere that supports informal meetings between residents, becoming a place to relax and play.

Apart from city parks, sports fields are also a form of open space that reflects social interaction. Stadiums or fields are often places where people with the same interests gather, whether to watch sports matches, participate in physical activities, or simply interact with fellow fans. This space provides togetherness and cooperation in the context of entertainment and physical activity.

The square, as the central open space in the middle of the city, also makes a significant contribution in creating social interaction. With parks, fountains and monuments around it, the square becomes a center for social activities, such as community events, art exhibitions or informal meetings between residents. The square facilitates the exchange of ideas and experiences between individuals.

Burial grounds, as unusual as they may sound, can also be a form of open space for social interaction. Some cemeteries are designed with gardens and leisure areas, creating an environment that supports reflection and social support between residents, making them places to share memories and celebrate lives gone by.

Traditional markets or night markets are another form of open space that encourages social interaction. The market is not only a place to shop, but also a place where traders and buyers can interact, exchange stories and build relationships. Markets create rich communities and social lives around them.

Finally, city parks or community gardens are a form of open space that is managed jointly by the community. Whether through community gardening activities, community events, or informal gatherings, urban parks become places where social interaction can thrive. This open space is a real reflection of collaboration and citizen involvement in creating an empowered and interacting environment. Through its various forms, open space enriches the social life of urban communities and provides a platform for meaningful relationships to be established.

Overall, through its various forms, open space not only functions as a physical place for activities, but also becomes a mirror of social interaction that gives color to urban life. Good design and effective management of open spaces play an important role in strengthening social ties in dynamic urban communities. Its existence creates a strong city identity, as well as providing a forum for various community activities that support living together. In this way, open space is not only a physical element, but also the heart of the city's social and cultural life, forming a space for interaction, gathering and celebrating the diversity that is the hallmark of an urban community.

## CONCLUSION

Each city has a unique identity, formed through the complexity of the relationship between society and its environment. The city's ability to maintain its character and identity, which is

known as local genius, is the main key. The soul of the community and its body, which are manifested in the physical elements of the city, complement each other, creating a strong unity. The importance of city development is not only from a physical perspective, but also involves cultural, social and economic aspects. The uniqueness and characteristics of a city are not only influenced by historical factors, but also by how the people maintain and develop this identity. Cities that are able to create uniqueness, whether in the fields of business, culture, arts, or science and technology, tend to gain a higher reputation and popularity. In the context of semiotic analysis of city elements, it can be seen that a city is not just a physical collection of buildings, but also a system of meaning. The symbols and signs in a city become an integral part of the process of forming its identity. By using a semiotic approach, we can interpret and interpret how these elements contribute to the city's image and identity. This is where the importance of using site analysis symbols in urban design comes from as graphic representations that reflect the features and elements of a site. These symbols are an important tool for designers and urban planners in understanding the complexity of a site and determining the most appropriate design solutions. By using site analysis symbols, we can build a better understanding of the complexity of cities and develop design solutions that are responsive to the unique identity and needs of each location. Open spaces, such as city parks, sports fields, squares, cemeteries, traditional markets, and city parks or community gardens, provide a platform for meetings, exchange of ideas, and the formation of relationships amidst the dynamics of urban life. Good design and effective management of open spaces have a significant impact on strengthening social ties in communities. Open spaces are the center of the city's social and cultural life, creating a strong identity and supporting various community activities. The importance of understanding the role of open space in an urban context highlights the need for wise design to maintain a balance between physical elements, social interaction and environmental sustainability.

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