Cultural Space - a Conceptual Deliberation and Characterization as Urban Space

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Abstract

This paper concentrates mainly on the conceptual deliberation of Cultural Space based on review of prevailing ideas in the literature. The focus of this paper lies on the characterization of cultural space particularly as urban space. It has been revealed that like the word 'Culture' which indicates the way of life of people, cultural space is also concerned about both people and their environment within a range of natural and cultural values. The notion of cultural space is not merely a physical entity but also a perceptual reality. This paper attempts to determine the characteristic features of 'Cultural Space' in order to visualize that theme in real world and to understand those as urban space. It has been identified that concept of cultural space encompasses the collective memory and historical layering of spaces where the additional structure provides memory, identity and imageability of collective existential consciousness. In addition to the perceptual component; the cultural space comprises of social and physical attributes of space.

Key words: Culture, Cultural space, Urban space, Perception of space, Concepts of space.

1 Introduction

Culture is about a group of people who share a set of values, beliefs, worldview symbol system, which are learned and transmitted from one generation to the next. (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952) Culture is the way of life of a people while the spatial framework of urban spaces could be called cultural space. The rules, which guide the organisation of space, time, meaning and communication; show regularity because they are linked systematically to culture. The concentrated focus of this paper is to unveil the concept of culture and cultural space in urban spatial pattern. In this sense, the conceptual deliberation of cultural space of this paper is mainly established through review of similar concepts and taking arguments from the prevailing literature. Besides these, this paper tries to converge on the governing issues of culture, which influence the spatial structure of urban spaces. It also attempts to pinpoint the qualitative as well as perceptual, spatial component of culture and cultural spaces to consolidate the attributes of these spaces.

2 Culture and Cultural Space

The word culture, from the Latin root "colere" (to inhabit, to cultivate, or to honour), generally refers to patterns of human activity and the symbolic structures that give such activity significance. According to Raymond Williams 'Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language'. (Williams, 1983: 87) Different definitions of 'culture' reflect different theoretical orientations for understanding, or criteria for valuing human activity. Anthropologists most commonly use the term 'culture' to refer to the universal human capacity to classify, codify and communicate their experiences symbolically. (Wikipedia, 2006)

One of the important definitions of 'culture' is given by Margaret Mead in 1937;

> Culture means the whole complex of traditional behaviour, which has been developed by the human race and is successively learned by each generation. A culture is less precise. It can mean the forms of traditional behaviour, which are characteristics of a given society, or of a group of societies, a certain race, a certain area, or of a certain period of time. (Kupiainen et. al, 2004)

The term culture itself has its own history. The primary meaning of culture is the cultivating of natural growth and by extension in recent times; it has come to mean the cultivating of human mind. Culture therefore refers to behaviour

patterns socially acquired and socially transmitted by means of symbols. It includes language, tradition, customs and institutions. (Thapar, 1987) Furthermore, culture in relation to tradition links the past to the present. It has therefore a historical context, which is as significant as the cultural form itself. Culture is always a collective phenomenon, because it is at least partly shared with people who live or lived within the same social environment, which is where it was learned. It is the collective programming of the mind. In this conception, culture is an ever changing entity not a static one; culture is learned not inherited; it derives from the social environment, not from the genes. (Segers, 2004)

> 'Culture' is a mental construction rather than the innate property of a certain community. Cultural theory considers culture as a system consisting of a number of subsystems, such as economic, educational, religious, technological and artistic subsystems. Each subsystem is based on all activities as performed by participants. This means that a systemic approach is interested in all the 'actions', in all the 'activities' as performed by the participants within a particular subsystem (Segers, 2004).

According to Young, culture is the way of life of a people. It consists conventional patterns of thought and behaviour, including values, beliefs, rules of conduct, political organisation, economic activity, and the like, which are passed on from one generation to the next by learning and not by biological inheritance. (Young, 1994) Therefore, culture is the system of meanings, values regarding which we interact. The organisation of space, time, meaning and communication are systematically linked to culture. (Rapoport, 1977: 14) (Fig: 01)
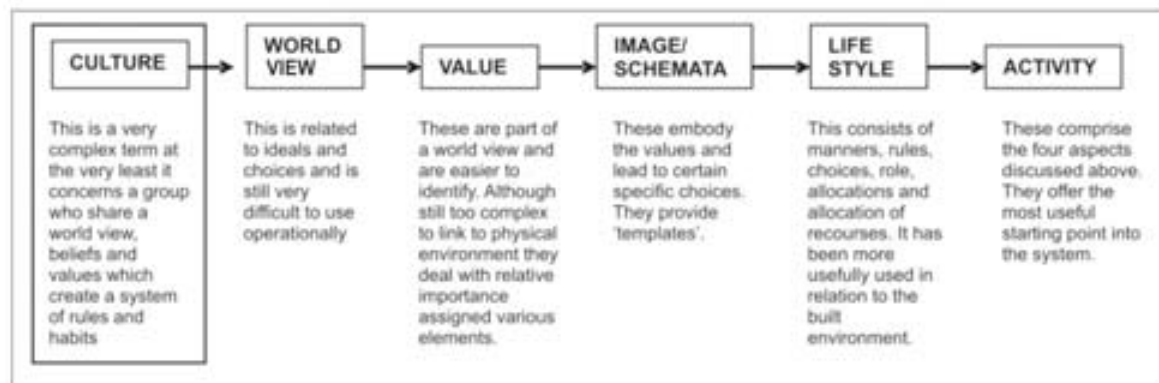

CULTURE	WORLD VIEW	VALUE	IMAGE/ SCHEMATA	LIFE STYLE	ACTIVITY
This is a very complex term at the very least it concerns a group who share a world view, beliefs and values which create a system of rules and habits	This is related to ideals and choices and is still very difficult to use operationally	These are part of a world view and are easier to identify. Although still too complex to link to physical environment they deal with relative importance assigned various elements.	These embody the values and lead to certain specific choices. They provide 'templates'.	This consists of manners, rules, choices, role, allocations and allocation of recourses. It has been more usefully used in relation to the built environment.	These comprise the four aspects discussed above. They offer the most useful starting point into the system.

Figure: 01 Concept of culture influencing lifestyle and activities. Source: Rapoport, 1977

In this regard, it can be summarised that culture is learned and depended on being brought up within a framework - a **cultural space.** Second, a large component of culture is below the level of conscious awareness. Third, cultural patterns structure both thought and perception. In the past, cultures were often thought of in quite rationalistic ways as conscious creations. Similarly, there were more or less explicit rankings of cultures from the most primitive to ours. Modern thinking about culture is in some ways consistent with psychoanalytic ideas, especially with respect to the limited and subordinate role of intellect, with the development of the modern culture concept the intellect itself came to be viewed differently. It was now understood that people acquire the ideas, beliefs, values, and the like, of their society, and that these cultural features provide the basic materials by which they think and perceive. (Young, 1994)

Society is the structure of their interaction, and cultural space defines the location of an individual (or group) in this structure. The term cultural space is concerned about both people and their environment within a range of natural and cultural values. The word **'cultural space'** define not only a certain type of space where cultural activities are perform rather it is more related with the pattern of space, the environmental characteristics and above all the surrounding people within it. Behavioural and psychological spaces are also related to cultural space defined by various groups in terms of varying categories, taxonomies or domains (Rapoport 1977: 14). Therefore, cultural space is not any specific entity of space rather it is individual or collective perception of spatial quality of cultured people. These types of spaces are profoundly involved with the ways of life of people. As culture is always a collective phenomenon, these spaces should be communal space of different activity.

3. Urban Space as Cultural Space and the analogous spatial concepts

Cultural space can be composed with the social interaction and social activity pattern of certain spaces which sometimes acts as an extension of public spaces even in the street. Hence, social activities depend on presence of others in public spaces and occur spontaneously as a direct consequence of people moving about and being in the same spaces. According to Jan Gehl, a social activity takes place every time at least two people are together in the same space for social interaction. (Gehl, 1996) The most wide spread social activities directly involved with passive contacts in urban spaces. Thus the urban spaces are also cultural spaces where human interaction and cultural activities take place.

By definition, urban spaces indicate those discrete spaces of cities (i.e. of urban areas) which are used by the public - a counter concept of 'private spaces' where public access is restricted. Typologically, linear urban spaces are streets or roads, and fat open spaces are 'squares' or 'plazas' (i.e. the Chawks in the oriental concept). Beyond these two groups, green open spaces (i.e. the parks) in cities are also considered as urban spaces characterised by the very presence of people and being situated in urban areas.

Beside such categorization of urban spaces, some other analogous spatial concepts of cultural space are also present. To define cultural spaces where human interaction and cultural activities take place at first we need to comprehend some conceptual perception with analogous explanation of cultural spaces which bear similar concept as urban space.

3.1. Social Space

In a Durkheimian sense, social space is a person's position in 'sociological space' and specifies nothing about his situation in physical space. (Durkheim, 1890) Social space is determined by the individual's perception of his social world and not by the objective description of his social relationship by any observer (Buttimer, 1972: 283). Rapoport defined social space which is used by social groups and reflecting their behaviour patterns, perceptions (Rapoport, 1977). However, definition of 'social space' commonly emphasis corporate and neighbourhood oriented activities (Ley, 1983:102). Social space complies with the concept of cultural space as both encompass the social and spatial factors in physical space and combine both the subjective and objective dimension of space. Cultural space is also used by some social group and reflecting the behaviour pattern and perception of individual by cultural activities. Like social space, cultural space also synthesizes the perceived and interactional dimension of space.

3.2 Neighbourhood Space

"A group of people who occupy a discrete territory constitute a neighbourhood" (Blower, 1973:51). In the literature, neighbourhood is an area where a group of people live in proximity. In 1968, Mumford stated that the neighbours are people united primarily not by common origins or common purposes but by the proximity of their dwelling. Neighbourhood is primarily a social phenomenon arising from cohabitation in a physical area. Thus, neighbourhood space is also an extension of social space as well as it contains some important aspects of cultural space. As cultural space is more than social phenomena like neighbourhood space, both social and physical factors are important in it.

3.3. Human Space

The concept of 'human space' indicate a small-scale physical space in the vast areal extent of a local area being defined by a perceptual boundary but involving a low level of social interaction. It is identified that the large physical extent of many 'localities' in cities are subdivided conceptually into smaller segments by the inhabitants on the basis of their cardinal direction or noticeable differentiation (Nilufar, 1997). Hence, human space is more involved with the perceptual boundary of inhabitant in smaller segment. Similarly cultural space also contains the perceptual boundary of inhabitant but it deals in large-scale social level with maximum social interaction. To some extent, cultural space is a synthesis of small-scale physical space in large social context.

3.4 Community Space

Community is a fundamental concept of human association in sociology. Hence, in community space, a group of people is living together in one particular area that is considered as a unit because of their common interests, background or nationality. Thus community space is more involved with particular group of people in neighbourhood scale where as in cultural space people of common interest, background and nationality meet in urban space. In this sense, community space in urban scale is much more involved with the basic concept of cultural space.

3.5 Existential space

Christian Norberg-Schulz defines existential space as a relatively stable system of perceptual schemata, or image of the environment. Existential space has its roots with the existence of human perception. Social and philosophical sensitivity is the two possible sources of information for developing the perception of existential space. Therefore, Architectural space and Existential space are very much similar, where the first one denotes the subjective character of space and the other one objectively define man-space relationship. Like existential space, cultural space has its roots with the existence of human perception. Beyond its social and philosophical concept, cultural space objectively defines man space relationship from human perception level.

Hence, to perform the activities whatever social or cultural we need some spaces. According to these spatial concepts, cultural space resembles some important components of Social, Human, Neighbourhood, Community and above all Existential Space. From the above discussion it reveals that like social space, cultural space is reflecting the behaviour pattern and perception of social group by cultural activities and constitutes the social component. Characteristics of Human space are emphasized by synthesizing small-scale physical space in large social context and put emphasis on the physical indices. Cultural space is the extended variety of community space also; where people of common interest, background and nationality meet in urban space. It is clear that some important components of the above discussed spatial concepts are physically, perceptually or socially overlaps with the notion of cultural space.

4. Qualification of Cultural Space: it's components and attributes

The cultural space, that intermingle the history and layering of traditional urban space with the orientation and recognition, create existence of sense of place. This layering of space and culture create interconnected environment with human perception. To find out the inner meaning of cultural space these perceptual aspects need to reveal first. Thus, to make a clear deliberation of the urban spaces as cultural spaces the following sub sections tries to entangle their various components and their attributes. Among those, the most important character is how we perceive the existence or spirit of a space with our cognitive values and norms. Then come the physical character and social meaning of such spaces. Not but the least the existence of human perception in social, philosophical as well as psychological level is deeply rooted with the man space relationship in urban scale that also underline the attributes of perceptual components.

4.1 The Perceptual Components

The meaning of cultural space more refers to the human perception rather than any concrete entity of spaces. It has been described that although the physical components of all cities like house, street, gathering places, cult buildings, plants and so on are same; it is the term culture that varies from region to region. In fact, the inner meaning of spaces especially urban spaces may differ from culture to culture as well as to the geographical setting of cities. In this sense, Rapoport claims that the nature of meaning and relationships among the elements with the associated human behaviours may differ under different socio spatial situations (Rapoport, 1977:15). This proposition supports a view, which conceives human societies as spatial phenomena. It is therefore believed that, in urban areas the built environment also plays an important role in the formation of social behaviour pattern in local areas. It is now understood that social characteristics and activities of people have association with the physical aspects of urban spaces and other levels of urban environment.

Built or physical environment can be seen as setting for human activities and their perception to the materialistic world that determine human behaviour. Therefore, if the design of the environment is seen as a process of encoding information, then the users can decode it. If the code is not shared, not understood or inappropriate by the society, the environment does not communicate (Rapoport, 1977:03). Claude Levi-Strauss also noted that the city achieves a balance between natural and artificial elements; it is an object of nature and a subject of culture. Hence, people's perception of a space relates to their culture and their individual memory of place. The memory association plays an important role to define the actual perception of spaces incorporated with the tradition and lifestyle of individual community. Subsequently, to define and reveal how cities really are experienced, comprehended by their users; the effects of values, images, schemata, and human behaviour on the shaping of urban form; some perceptual components of cultural space that are assumed to be related with the perception of cultural space need to be revealed. Hence, the perceptual components are as follows.

4.1.1 Sense of Place: The relationship between people and environment is transactional. Space is more than three-dimensional physical space (Rapoport, 1977:12). The environment is made up of combination of physical and social features; the sense of place is an experience created by the setting combined with what a person bring to it. In other

words to some degree we create our own places, they do not exist independent of us (Steele, 1981). Sense of place is a particular experience of person in specific physical settings and surroundings of spaces within the social settings of culture (Figure 02).
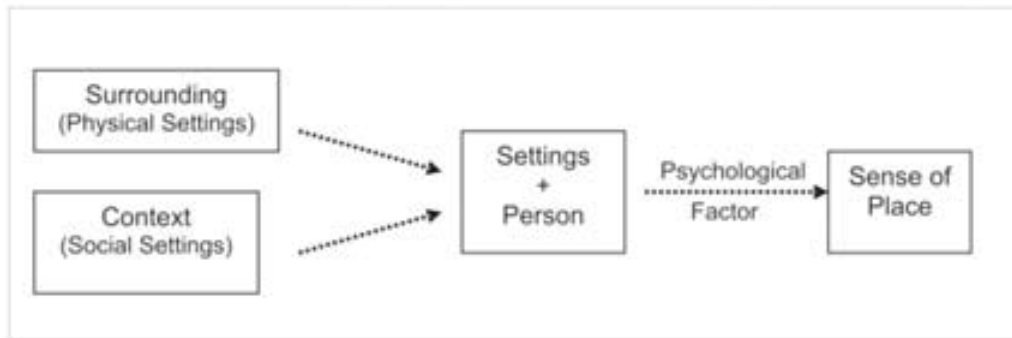

Figure 02: Sense of Place.   Source: Steele, 1981.

4.1.2 Memory: Colloquially memory means the process of recalling facts or experience. Memory is one of the most important requirements of cultural space and memory association with time can create a sense of place. According to Aldo Rossi, the city itself is the locus of collective memory of its people, and like memory, it is associated with objects and places (Rossi, 1982). In general, the history of a place is its collective memory.

4.1.3 Orientation: Memory as knowledge or recognition is the presupposition of orientation (Schulz, 2000). In other words, one must know where he or she is going if they want to get there. Orientation is extremely important and basic to the behaviour of all motile organisms- animal and people. It is linked to survival, sanity and cultural variability (Lynch, 1960). The spatial organization of a place helps to orient people associated with memory in a particular situation. It is also key element in defining the physical entity of a person within a space.

4.1.4 Perception and Cognition: 'Perception' is the most fundamental mechanism linking people and the surrounding environment, where all pervasive process involved in entire man-environment interaction (Rapoport, 1977:178). The term perception comes from the Latin Percipere to take hold of, to feel, to comprehend. The term 'cognition' has been used to describe the way in which people understand structure, learn the environment, and use the mental map to negotiate it (Rapoport, 1977:31). Cognition from the Latin word for getting to know refers both to the process of knowing and understanding the product; the thing known (Rapoport, 1977:109). Perception deals with how information is gathered and obtained, while cognition with how it is organized (Figure 03). The perceptual and cognitive image of cultural space should be perceived by the user of that space.

Figure 03: Cognitive schemata of Built Environment   Source: Rapoport, 1977

4.1.5 Identification and Imageability: In the identification of any given environment, memory performs a fundamental function whose particular atmosphere is spontaneously recorded, even before we have become acquainted with its indicative markings, i.e. those characteristic motifs that give it a well defined configuration. In other words, it is necessary to know how of a place in order to recognize its Identity (Schulz, 2000). 'Imageability' is the quality of a physical object, which gives it a high probability of evoking a strong image in any given object. Therefore, a workable image requires three things. First, the identification of an object as a separate entity called 'identity'. Second, the image must include the spatial or pattern relation of the object to the observer and to other object. Finally, this object must

have some meaning for the observer, whether practical or emotional. Identification and imageability is directly related with orientation of space.

Hence, the qualitative relationship between human perception and space as well as the abstract qualitative aspect helps to notify the spatial and configurational attributes of cultural spaces. In this case, Heidegger denotes that, space does not indicate an abstract mathematical continuity, but a qualitative relationship among concrete places (Heidegger, 1971). Orientation in fact refers to cardinal direction of space, identification indicates to the concrete forms of the environment, and memory symbolizes to the emblematic images of which it is composed. If one does not orient oneself, one can neither travel nor reach a destination, and one cannot reach an agreement if one does not identify with the spirit of place. Moreover, it is not possible to experience belonging without a memory of the constituent features of a place. These all components are profoundly involved with the perception of cultural space. Therefore, cultural space is more related with the perceptual component besides the social and morphological aspects.

4.2 Physical and Social Attributes

Cultural spaces vary from region to region, from city to city, from area to area and even from person to person. Each space must have some distinct identical value. Every places and elements must be distinguishably different before they can be used in orientation, in the subjective definition of areas, in subjective distances or incorporated into mental maps. (Rapoport, 1977: 229) Therefore, cultural space is not any specific entity of place rather it is individual or collective perception of spatial quality of cultured people. These types of spaces are profoundly involve with the ways of life of people .Cultural space is the concoction of all previously the mentioned spaces. As culture is always a collective phenomenon, these spaces should be communal space of different activity. From the above discussion of analogous spaces , it is clear that cultural space is more involved with the perceptual dimension of man space relationship. Hence, cultural space is not any certain type of space where cultural activity is performed rather it is combination of three most complex words; Man, Space and Culture. (Fig 04)
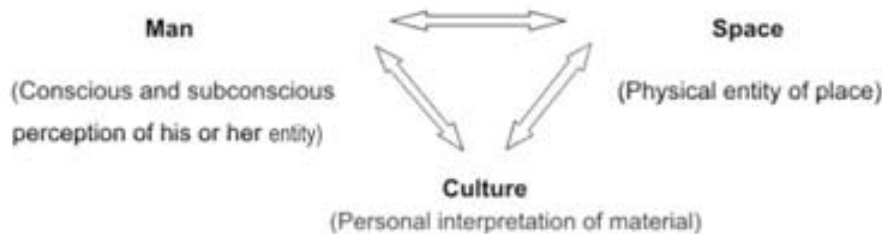
Man

(Conscious and subconscious

perception of his or her entity)

Space

(Physical entity of place)

Culture

(Personal interpretation of material)

Figure: 04 Tri fold relationship of man, space and culture

The diagram shows a threefold relationship where man, space and culture all are interconnected and complementary to each other to create a base for cultural space. Here the conscious and subconscious perception of man creates his physical entity of place into spaces, at the same time his personal interpretation of material world creates sense of sensitivity to culture. Moreover, these all are inter related and dependent to each other and from theoretical interpretation it seems that without the existence of one element the existence of cultural space is not valid at all. Hence, some physical and social attributes of cultural spaces are highlighted on the next section that encompasses the perceptual, social as well as morphological components.

4.2.1 Physical Attributes

The physical attributes of cultural space are two fold, which is determined by the perceptual and morphological features of spaces. Although the morphological features are to some extent tangible, the perceptual components are indefinable in nature. Morphological indicators of space exhibits expressive character on the other hand, perceptual features of cultural space are more qualitative and intangible hence, to be perceived by cognitive process. It has been discussed that cultural space is an extension of social, community, human as well as existential space and some significant properties of these spaces are present as an essential features of cultural space. Hence, the morphological properties of a space can be determined by the characteristics of its urban fabrics, prominence of location, street network and open space system. On the other hand, perceptual component is very much related with the memory, orientation, and imageability aspects and the perceptual quality of cultural space is revealed by the historical layering and enclosure feeling of space.

4.2.2 Social Attributes

Society plays a vital role in setting up an urban environment. The attributes of cultural spaces to some extent create an order where order involves a relation, or a set of relationships, of a definite sort. Social order in urban spaces can be recognised and described on careful observation by a set of varied characteristics and attributes. Cultural space in any society is much more related with the social space hence, social order of urban space is important to understand the society. Other than physical order, social order in some cases may not be manifested spatially, but once the social order of the spaces is understood, an apparent chaos becomes comprehensible. The structure of any society can be characterised by the social as well as cultural attributes. Cultural activity of any spaces is a social phenomenon and different social attributes like ethnicity, activity, behaviour pattern and neighbourly relation of community etc. are indices that determine the quality of cultural space. People of different ethnic background use urban space differently therefore, their cultural use should be different. On the other hand, community of densely built up urban areas behave differently hence, their activity of urban spaces can be reflected in their neighbourly relation in social as well as cultural spaces. The social aspects that are responsible to shape the cultural spaces are therefore necessary to point out according to the following aspects:

- Population density and neighbourly relation
- Religion and Ethnic background of people
- Community Activity, Behaviour Pattern and Use of Cultural Space.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion it can be stated that the entire discussion therefore, related to the use of space and how we perceive the existence or spirit of a space with our cognitive values and norms. The cultural space, that intermingle the history and layering of traditional urban space with the orientation and recognition, create existence of sense of place within the urban areas. This layering of space and culture create interconnected environment with human perception. By interpreting the phenomenological aspects of cultural space with physical and social attributes, as well as the identity of this space in urban settings can be revealed.

Apparently, it seems that the historical layering of urban space, as well as the strong memorable perceptual images produces an interwoven social system that helps to promote cultural space in urban areas. As culture depends on people and their environment; cultural spaces in urban areas are distinct in character where memory, orientation, identification, sense of place are overlapped and physical-social attributes are interconnected with surrounding people and environment. This super layering of spaces combines the characteristics of urban spaces and thus generates different types of cultural spaces.

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