

AN EVALUATION OF RESIDENTS PERCEPTION OF IDENTITY IN PUTRAJAYA NEW TOWN

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ABSTRACT: *The National Physical Plan highlighted the problem of towns and cities in Malaysia lacking in character and identity. This research foresees that new towns should be able to portray its distinct identity through the design of its physical elements. However, the “created” identity in a new town in certain aspects may differ from that perceived by its inhabitants. Thus, the main interest of the research is to examine the elements and qualities of identity that residents associate with the new town, as compared to what has been created. The research was approached using a mixed method approach with questionnaire, interviews, field observation and content analysis to be its main research tools. This paper presents the research methodology and the initial findings of the questionnaire survey. This paper highlights the aspects that need to be considered in helping to prepare the final stage of in-depth interview, mind-mapping and photo recognition task. The paper concludes by discussing the future direction of the research.*

Keywords: *Identity, Perception, Image, New Towns, Urban Design, Place*

Introduction

Identity is fundamental to a city's image and its culture. A variety of research has been conducted using various definitions of identity to determine what qualities it comprises. In this research, identity is defined as qualities of a place that are recognized as distinctive to the people, as compared to other places (Lynch 1981). This paper introduces the background of the research which includes the methods used to examine identity of a new town, and discusses the qualities of Putrajaya that are recognized as distinctive by its residents, focusing on the questionnaire survey. The dilemma of creating a new identity for new towns, especially in identifying of what could be sustained in the future will be the conclusion to this paper.

Research Background

Malaysia's concern for identity has been highlighted for more than two decades ago and it is now significantly addressed in the National Urbanization Policy (NUP), apart from being an agenda in the National Physical Plan (JPBD 2005) and the 9th Malaysian Plan. Among issues addressed in the NUP include towns in Malaysia lacking in character and identity, as a result of urbanization growth and globalization processes. This leads to the possibilities of towns and cities becoming homogeneous and have the risk of losing identity (JPBD 2006). This research formed the assumption that this may not be the case with new towns. New towns should be able

to portray its distinct identity through the design of its physical elements. This is due to the proper planning involved in their design, with their identity created as part of the overall objectives of building the town. It is important to note that new development with established design guidelines has the privilege of creating its own identity (Thompson-Fawcett 1996). In this research, new towns are defined as developments which are self-consciously built from scratch on a previously unused land (Lang 2005). In Malaysia, the New Economic Policy (NEP 1971-1990) played an important role in making developments of new towns (as growth centers) as priority, focusing first on urbanizing rural areas in its poverty eradication first, then to urban and suburban areas for a balanced economic growth (EPU 1999). Since then and with the launch of Vision 2020 more new towns were developed, the popular ones being Cyberjaya and Putrajaya.

However, the need to keep up with the urbanization and globalization process may also tends to force decision makers to make their own notion of what is best for the public when planning a new city or town. This may include giving the identity to the place, which sometimes involves ignorance of local context. This is a common global scenario, as mentioned by Lang (2005) whereby most urban developments today pay little attention to its context. In Malaysia, there is a lack of concern to involve public in the design process (Ahmad Bashri 2000). Most designers tend to make their own explanation of what the user needs based on informal discussion and observation. Poor design methods have also led to design created paying little regards to the site characteristics and its context. This led to many new designs in urban area to be estranged from its surroundings and disturbing the existing sense of place and identity. The “created” identity in a new town in certain aspects may differ from that perceived by its inhabitants. Decision makers may create the ideal elements of identity in a new development but it is the public who will determine whether this ‘planted identity’ is recognized and associated with its identity (Eben Saleh 1998). In the design of urban spaces, consideration of public perception is most important in the perceived form of the city (Rapoport 1977).

Identity commonly matures with the growth of a city through its inhabitants. Shuhana (1997) observed that in existing towns where there is a clearly distinguished physical difference between the old and the newer parts of the town center, the former apparently have a stronger identity as perceived by its residents with more meanings attached to the physical environment. This raises the issue of newer environment lacking identity because it has to rely merely on its functional qualities rather than the distinctiveness of its physical character. Since, one of the three important components of identity is meanings and associations, it is important to determine the effects of a new environment to the residents through their perception since in this type of environment, meanings play a restricted role in influencing its identity. Nevertheless, the real environment is actually the one that is perceived by the people. The perception of the residents is necessary to determine whether this “planned” identity is read and understood by them and may later become an element worth sustaining. It is not surprising that a gap exists between the designers and the public due to different skills as a result of different socio-cultural backgrounds. The designers’ intentions may be misunderstood and the public’s sensitivity towards certain physical features may not be included in the design. It is therefore assumed that by determining the public perception of identity, it is possible to bridge this gap

by distinguishing the differences and similarities between the created elements of identity and the public perception of identity. Thus the aim of this research is to examine the differences and similarities between the created identity in a new town, through its physical elements and qualities, and that as perceived by its residents.

Methodology

The methodology for this research is based on two considerations. The first is based on the common methods used by previous researchers in the field, and second, on the research questions presented. Most urban design research (Lynch 1960, Shuhana 1997, Dolbani 2000, Hasanuddin 2003, Norsidah 2008), are conducted as a mixed-methodology research, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods, due to the nature of the field's multi-dimensional concerns. This allows the researcher to maximize the strengths and minimize the weaknesses of each of the methods (Groat and Wang 2002), hence the adoption of this methodology in this study. This research aims to examine the physical environment of a new town that plays a role in presenting the identity of the town. According to Lynch (1981), identity refers to the distinctiveness of a place, what is different, unique, uncommon or special about a place. Therefore, what is sought in this research is the distinctiveness or uniqueness of the physical aspects of the new town and their characteristics, which indicates the qualities that they have.

There are two significant perspectives to consider in this study, firstly, the identification and description of the created identity, as evaluated through the researcher's observations, and secondly, the recognition, memory and description of identity being perceived by the residents. Both stances involve the evaluation and perception of the environment, which is essential in measuring identity. As argued by Lynch (1981), identity can be measured through simple tests of recognition, recall and description of the physical environment by the people, hence the adoption of this approach in this research. The nature of the research, which involves an immense amount of cognitive process, requires this study to be conducted qualitatively. However, the pattern of residents' perception is also important to be obtained quantitatively, in order to cross examine with the qualitative analysis, but this quantitative aspect will only be a subsidiary function. Therefore, a mixed-methodology is implemented in this research, combining qualitative and quantitative methods in data collection and using means of triangulation and grounded theory approach in the analysis.

The research questions presented in this study involves examining the created physical characteristic of the town, the residents' perception of the physical characteristics of the town, the residents' perception of the symbol of the town and the differences and similarities between the observed characteristics and the perceived characteristics. In order to respond to each of these queries, the most suitable methods and techniques for data collection is identified in the following sub topics.

Identifying the physical elements and qualities of identity created in a new town.

The qualitative method is used to identify the physical elements and qualities of identity which was created and considered in the initial development of the new town. This is accomplished by investigating theories and content analysis of documents such as development plans, development proposals, and design guidelines, apart from inquiring expert opinion through interviews with relevant authorities. A field observation is conducted to record the existing conditions of the town. The physical elements of the town, whether natural, man-made, or even non-visual elements such as activities is observed. Their qualities are determined by studying the characteristics or features of the elements, location and features of the place. For non-visual elements, the qualities include activity type, features of the location, number of people and frequency of visits. All of the information is recorded on observation checklists or interview checklists to ensure the data collected corresponds to each other in order to make comparisons at a later stage. For the purpose of this paper, this component will not be elaborated.

- a.) Determining the residents' perception on the identity of a new town, through its physical elements and qualities.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods are used to inquire the residents' perception. The quantitative method is used to identify the residents' perception of the physical characteristics of the town and their perception on the symbol of the town. This is accomplished through a survey using questionnaire on 330 residents. The results of this survey establish the pattern of the residents' perception, which is categorized into the percentage or frequencies of responses to certain elements and qualities of identity. The qualitative method is also implemented to obtain the residents' perception. This is accomplished through in-depth interview, mental mapping test and photo-recognition task with 20 to 30 selected residents as respondents. The data collected in this method will be cross-examined with that of the previous methods to strengthen the validity of the analysis. The residents' perception on identity is enquired through their attitude towards the physical elements of the town, whether they are natural or man-made visual elements, or non-visual elements like activities. The residents' recognition, opinion and evaluation of the physical elements and features are also considered. These include what type of activity they do, the location for these activities, and how frequent they perform the activities. They are also inquired on how they find their way around, why they go certain places, and what they noticed or remembered or thought to be distinctive and why they noticed it. Their evaluation and opinion on what is good, favorable and worth retaining or otherwise and why they think so, are also obtained. The result of the questionnaire survey will be a focus of discussion in this paper.

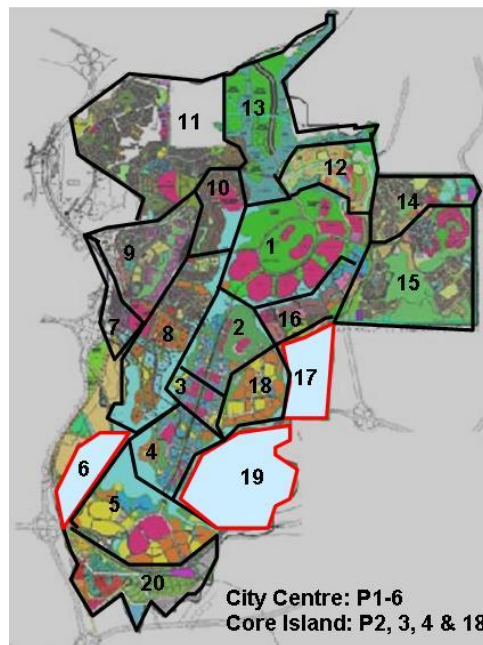
- b.) Examining the differences and similarities between the physical elements and qualities of identity created in a new town, and its residents' perception.

The qualitative method is used to examine the differences and similarities between the physical elements and qualities of identity which has been identified existed in the new town, and to those which has been recognized and remembered by its residents. This is done by compiling all the data collected from the previous methods, which include document analysis, expert opinion, field observation, residents' survey and

focus interview, and re-categorizing them to derive similar components of elements and qualities. A general consequence is drawn from a tabulation of these data and a detailed cross analysis is conducted qualitatively.

The Case Study Area

In view of the fact that the research is looking into what is created, the study focuses on the development of new towns which are planned from scratch and contains complete amenities of a new township. The study concentrates on the development of new towns initiated by the Malaysian government, which controls comprehensive policies and guidelines, especially those related to identity. A few new towns are identified under this criteria but a survey of perception of identity involving residents of various new towns would be difficult to generalize due to the complex relationship between the residents' knowledge and their physical surroundings. Since a very comprehensive study is required, a case-study approach is selected. This is believed to be the best method as it is able to exemplify in detail how identity is perceived in a new town. The selected area of study is Putrajaya, a new town, designed and planned to be the federal government administrative capital for Malaysia in the same model as other cities in the world built for that purposes such as Brasilia and Canberra. This selection was made due to the aim of Putrajaya to become a model city, with particular concerns for image and identity (Jebasingam 2006). The area of study covers the whole town, consisting of 20 precincts. The availability of documents facilitates studies on the created elements of identity in Putrajaya and field observation enables recordings of what currently exists in the physical environment. Nevertheless, not all precincts are fully developed, thus only the established precincts with recognizable elements are considered in the observation. This means Precincts 6, 17 and 19 are excluded (see Figure 1).



[Source: Planning Department, Putrajaya Corporation]

Figure 1: Putrajaya Precincts

The research focuses only on the residents' perception. However, due to the limited resources available on the residents' population data, only the residents living in public housing in established residential precincts are considered, namely those living in Precincts 8, 9, 10, 11, 14 and 16. Those living in other

precincts and official residences such as the Palace grounds, the Prime Minister's House, the Deputy Prime Minister's House and all other official ministers' residences are not considered in this study. The elements of identity consist of physical appearance, activities and meanings (Lynch 1960) and its qualities include the characteristics that describe the distinctiveness of those elements. Due to the huge scope of work concerned, only elements of physical appearance are looked into comprehensively. Elements of activities and meanings are not studied in depth, but are regarded as the roles they play and their influence as qualities to describe the physical structures. Putrajaya is also listed as one of the special feature towns, with its feature being a 'Special Role Centre' (JPBD 2005). With these assertions, Putrajaya remains a discourse among academicians and professionals in the built environment, which urges the researcher to investigate further into its establishment. In addition, familiarity with the place provides background information necessary and assists in smooth progress of the survey and fieldwork. Previous acquaintance with its development and authority officials is also of an advantage to gain access to documents and conduct interviews. Apart from that, the location of Putrajaya itself is also an important consideration to reduce unnecessary time and financial constraints for the research.

The Survey Procedure

The sampling method adopted in this questionnaire survey is the probability sampling type which involves statistical generalization to observe certain patterns in the survey findings. This is drawn from a sample of population which include all persons ages 7 or older living in established residential precincts of Putrajaya (namely, Precincts 8, 9, 10, 11, 14 & 16). The sampling size is based on De Vaus (2002, 81) table with sample sizes requirement for various sampling errors at 95% confidence level and sampling error 5.5%, which requires a sampling size of 330 respondents (De Vaus 2002). There was no accurate sampling frame available, though there was a list of addresses available (more than 12,000 units); more than 1,100 were identified as vacant. Furthermore, there was no record of which units were vacant and to produce an accurate list of sampling frame was time consuming. However, with the availability of accurate supplementary information on strata from demographic information from PJC and housing units information from PJH (as of March 2008), the most suitable type of probability sampling to use is stratified sampling (Neuman 2006). In this sampling type, the population is divided into subpopulation (strata), so relative sample size is controlled by pre-determining the proportion of different strata with samples. These will guarantee more representative samples than simple random sampling. The stratum of interest for subpopulation is according to precincts, ethnicity and gender, as listed in tables 1 to 3 below.

Table 1: Stratified Selection for Precinct.

Subpopulation	Total Elements	%	Respondents Required	Samples Obtained
Precinct 8	6,434	13.8	46	46
Precinct 9	21,067	45.2	149	149
Precinct 10	1,044	2.2	7	7
Precinct 11	11,504	24.7	81	81
Precinct 14	2,457	5.2	18	18
Precinct 16	4,132	8.9	29	29
TOTAL	46,639	100	330	330

[Source: Fieldwork, 2008]

Table 2: Stratified Selection for Ethnicity.

Subpopulation	Total Elements	%	Respondents Required	Samples Obtained
Malay	44,090	94.5	312	312
Chinese	336	0.7	2	2
Indian	593	1.3	4	4
Others	1,620	3.5	12	12
TOTAL	46,639	100	330	330

[Source: Fieldwork, 2008]

Table 3: Stratified Selection for Gender (From Total Residents Aged 7 and Above).

Subpopulation	Total Elements	%	Respondents Required	Samples Obtained
Male	18,128	47.7	157	157
Female	19,871	52.3	173	173
TOTAL	37,999	100	330	330

[Source: Fieldwork, 2008]

Findings and Discussion

For the purpose of this paper, discussions are derived from the findings of a questionnaire survey conducted on 330 residents of Putrajaya. This, however, do not suggest a final and conclusive result as they only present the scenario of the second objective of the research which is, to determine the residents' perception on the identity of a new town. The discussion will be explained into two sections- first on the elements that the residents found to be distinctive, then on the qualities that they associate with identity. From the tables shown previously (tables 1 to 3), of the 330 residents involved, 47.7% were males and 52.3% were females, of which 94.5% were Malays and the remaining 5.5% of other ethnicity. The respondents' age group ranged from 7 to 60 and above, with a majority (33.9%) aged 26-39. Slightly more than half of the respondents worked in the government sector and most of them (40.9%) are with secondary school qualifications. In terms of familiarity with the place, 87.9% worked in Putrajaya and 43.1% have lived there for at least 4 years. Prior to the survey, a field observation and an analysis of the urban design guidelines and detailed urban design guidelines was made, focusing on contents related to image, character and identity. This will be discussed comparatively to the survey findings.

Distinct Elements and Qualities of Identity

The elements of identity established in this research are those found to be distinctive by the residents. These include physical features and appearance (buildings, landscape, and aesthetic quality), activities and functions (human interaction with place and how buildings and landscape are used) and meanings or symbols (human reactions on physical aspects and functions). This is consistent with theories developed by other scholars on identity and the findings of Shuhana (1997) in her research on Kuantan town which comprises of the older town centre and the newer town centre built post independence.

Table 4: Categories of Distinctive Elements Which Act as Symbols.

Elements	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Physical- bridge	1	.3	.3	.3
Physical- building	135	40.9	40.9	41.2
Physical- quality	77	23.3	23.3	64.5
Physical- landscape	15	4.5	4.5	69.1
Physical- space	2	.6	.6	69.7
Physical- lake	4	1.2	1.2	70.9
Activities	1	.3	.3	71.2
Function	64	19.4	19.4	90.6
Meaning	20	6.1	6.1	96.7
Do not know	8	2.4	2.4	99.1
None	3	.9	.9	100.0
Total	330	100.0	100.0	

[Source: Fieldwork, 2008]

In this survey, responds on distinctive elements was acquired by asking the residents what were the first thing that came to their minds when they think of Putrajaya. It was observed that the distinctive elements most frequently mentioned by the residents were buildings (see Table 4). These elements acted as symbols and unique features of the city and are used to distinguish places. This is found to be in compliance with the researcher's field observation and Putrajaya Corporation's planning intention. This research finding also corresponds with Shuhana's (1997) findings which also concluded that in an established town, buildings are the most important element used to associate with the identity of a town. The most frequently mentioned building by the respondents to be the symbol of Putrajaya was the Putra Mosque (Figure 2).



[Source: Author, 2008]

Figure 2: Putra Mosque.

Apart from the Putra Mosque being mentioned as symbols of Putrajaya, Alamanda was next in the list, followed by government office complexes. The high number of respondents mentioning buildings as symbols or unique features of the city suggested that buildings are the most distinctive element of identity to Putrajaya to its residents. Other elements mentioned as symbols were the physical qualities of the buildings and place, as well as Putrajaya's function as administrative offices or workplace. This proves that the element of function is more important, whereas meaning plays a minimal role in contributing towards the identity of a new town.



[Source: Author, 2008]

Figure 3: Putrajaya International Convention Centre (PICC).

Questions were also asked on which building, bridge, road and views they found to be most unique. It was observed that the Putrajaya International Convention Centre (PICC, as in Figure 3) was found to be most unique building followed by Putra Mosque and Palace of Justice. The most unique bridge was the Seri Wawasan Bridge (50.6%, Figure 4) and Seri Gemilang Bridge (14.8%). All of these elements were also listed in the field observation and Putrajaya Corporation's urban design reports, in no particular order.



[Source: Author, 2008]

Figure 4: Seri Wawasan Bridge, with a View of the Lake.

When asked which road or street the residents found most unique, most respondents tend to describe the location of the roads or street instead of actually giving the name of the street. In this survey, Persiaran Perdana (Figure 5) was ranked highest as the most unique road (42.7%). This was derived after analyzing the description of the road itself, which was described as The Boulevard by majority and to some it was mentioned as portions of the road, for instance, the Dataran Putrajaya road, Precincts 2, 3 or 4 main roads, or road to PICC. It can be concluded however, that these were all referring to Persiaran Perdana, which is the most distinctive stretch of road as indicated in Putrajaya's initial planning.



[Source: Author, 2008]

Figure 5: Persiaran Perdana (Boulevard).

It was observed that residents mostly do not know the name of the roads. One of the possible explanations to this is probably due to the lack of concurrence between the names of the roads and its physical characteristics. This results in the ability of the mind to make connections between the names and the physical characters, thus prompting the observer to completely forget the names. Another possible explanation is the trend of naming streets and places by numbering rather than names that reflect the local character of the area. This again make it difficult for the residents or visitors to remember the names as there is no clue of the physical characteristics that they can associate with the name of the particular street.



[Source: Author, 2008]

Figure 6: Dataran Putra.

It was also observed that the most interesting views were the views of Dataran Putra (see Figure 6) where 25.2% chose this element. Apart from that, 13.3% chose the view of the lake while 11.6% chose the Boulevard (Persiaran Perdana). The residents were also inquired on what are the elements they remembered and look for as clues to get around Putrajaya or to know their orientation in a place. Street signage was mentioned highest (78.4%), followed by design of buildings (11.2%). Although signage was the main clues to look for to get around the city, poor signage is also one of the reasons of getting lost in the city. Residents found that this mostly occurred in residential areas, especially new precincts. Apart from the signage, the most mentioned reason to be lost or confused in a place is due to the streets that looked the same.

These may also be the reasons for why most residents have trouble naming the roads. When asked to name three roads in Putrajaya, most described the location of the road, just like when asked to name a unique road. Some even responded they “do not know the name”. It is different with buildings, where residents are able to name most buildings in Putrajaya, which reflects the dominance of the buildings in influencing identity compared to street environment. This is despite Lynch’s (1960) theory that street, which is one of the examples of paths, is the most important element used to structure cities perceptually thus leading to the imageability of a city. At this juncture, it is worth noting that identity does not necessarily leads to imageability due to the different emphasis given to construe identity by the people.

According to Lynch (1960), nodes also have an influence on residents’ perception of identity. Nodes are strategic spots which has concentration of activities or thematic character. The survey enquired the residents of the places they went to for shopping and leisure, as well as places they would take visitors to. It was observed that Alamanda was chosen as the most popular place for shopping (70.3%) with the reason that there are many other things to do and watch there besides shopping. For leisure, Alamanda also ranked highest (58.2%) followed by Dataran Putra (10.9%) and Taman Warisan Pertanian (6.4%). The most popular reasons for choosing these places were that there were many things to do or watch there.

The residents' evaluation of the city towards the elements was also enquired by asking which places they like or dislike. Most liked places were Alamanda and Dataran Putra whereas disliked places was Precinct 11. It is interesting to note here that evaluation plays an important role in influencing the perception of identity where a positive evaluation leads to a stronger perceived identity. It is worth noting that the major difference between a new town like Putrajaya and other established cities is the lack of cultural identity and places for social interactions. The formal character of the streets also do not allow for on street activities such as hawking and stalls to operate, a character that is found to be most distinctive in established cities especially the historic ones.

The qualities are the characteristics or features that the residents found in the elements mentioned earlier, that they associate with the city's identity. The appearance of physical elements is important in determining how the residents recognize the elements. These include the height and size, architectural style, facade and decorations, condition and upkeep, building form, color, roof form, bill boards (signage) and building materials. Appearance was mentioned in all distinctive elements by the residents, especially on unique buildings, bridges, housing areas and streets. All of the respondents chose appearance as the quality for unique building, with architectural design and interesting views most frequently mentioned and 60% chose design of the bridge as the characteristics of a unique bridge. For unique housing areas, a total of 64.9% chose Precincts 8, 9 & 10. The reasons being were due to its building design, facilities available and landscaping of the area. For unique road, 38.2% mentioned the quality of views as the qualities of identity.

The location of a place in its context was not considered as a major contribution to the qualities of identity in Putrajaya. It can be concluded that appearance plays a more important role in influencing identity in Putrajaya since activities and meanings play a less dominant role here. This focuses the residents' attention to the most obvious elements visually. The buildings that were prominent in terms of appearance were those that are not commonly found in Malaysia such as the Putrajaya International Convention Centre (PICC), Putra Mosque and Palace of Justice. These buildings are more prominent than others due to their unique architectural character that is not typical of the civic buildings in the country.

The residents were also asked about their aspirations of the city, in terms of what can be improved. 33.3% mentioned that public facilities need to be upgraded, 29.4% wanted roads and traffic systems to be improved, and 23.9% request for public transport system to be upgraded. It can be assumed here that the street environment lacks identity and thus residents have to rely on information given by the signage to facilitate their way finding tasks in the town. This is one of the aspects that would need further investigation in this research.

Conclusion

This paper discusses the initial findings of a research that seeks to identify elements that influence residents' perception of identity in the context of a new town. This differs from other research which focuses on identity of an established town where

meanings are already attached due to its established history. The new town posed a challenge to researchers in understanding how a created environment will influence the resident's perception of identity considering the lack of meanings attached to newly created place. One of the important issues to be addressed is the role of meanings in an environment that is newly created and lacks the socio cultural influence on the physical character through time. The findings of the research are important in order to identify elements that may be retained to ensure the sustainability of identity to a place, particularly in the context of a new town.

The findings discussed in this paper are not final and conclusive since the research is still in progress. However, it is sufficient to mention that physical elements play an important role in influencing the identity as perceived by the residents as compared to meanings due to the lack of historical connections. This is not a surprise as the new towns do not have the advantage of having meanings attached to it and thus residents rely heavily on the physical elements in their process of recognizing a place. However, the unexpected finding is the lack of influence by the street environment on the residents perception of identity even though much emphasis were given in the planning and landscaping of the streets' environment and the streets networks as compared to other older towns. This research hopes to uncover the factors influencing this unexpected finding and thus contributes towards a better understanding of people's perception of the identity of a newly created place.

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