# The Future of Identity in Architecture and Urbanism

## *Background and Rationale*

It is reasonable to believe that individuals and communities identify with architecture and urban form, but this fact in itself is unremarkable. **What is not clear, however, is *how significant* architecture and urban form are in the totality of how individuals and communities shape their identity in the current condition.** By seeing architecture and urban form as a part of the greater phenomenon of identity we can advance our understanding of the impact that changes to buildings and places have on communities.

Identity is the foundation to a sense of belonging. It is the means by which people locate themselves as members of communities and groups and how they define their place in society. Identities are not singular, nor are they stable. New patterns in population movement, developments in transport and advances in electronic communication have loosened traditional ties between residence and identity. There has been a move from the "community sociality" [1] of physically localised connections, to an increasing "network sociality"[2] of informational, ephemeral and often temporary associations. Further to these classifications, global capitalism can be said to have created identities of "resistance"[3] – forms of identification more explicitly defined and proactive than previous generations. Any study of how architecture and urban form participate in the formation of identity must be seen in the context of this shifting global condition and must include a speculation on its future direction.

There is a lack of research to date that tackles new forms of cultural identity and looks at how these changes are transforming the shape of British towns and

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[1] A. Wittel (2001): Toward a Network Sociality. Theory, Culture & Society 18 (6).
[2] A. Wittel (2001): Toward a Network Sociality. Theory, Culture & Society 18 (6).
[3] M. Castells (2004) : The Power of Identity, p7-8.

cities – through specific examples of real streets, squares, buildings, etc. – as they change in light of globalising forces. We often hear in the news about problems of mass immigration, cultural tensions, fluctuating identities, community breakdown, etc., but almost never about how the design of buildings and cities might be contributing, resisting or mediating these changes, or how they in turn are coming to be changed themselves.

## Aims and Objectives

### Key Aims:

**1/**    **Discover how significant a role the built environment plays in the formation of personal and community identity.**

**2/**    **Discover the effect of immigration, network socialisation, ease of travel and the spread of global capitalism has on place attachment.**

*3/*    *Examine both new and historical urban fabric, and discover the different ways that they are occupied and transformed in reference to identity formation.*

*4/*    *Examine both urban and suburban conditions, and discover the different ways that they are occupied and transformed in reference to identity formation.*

*5/*    *Examine the experience of identity formation in a representative cross section of the British population.*

The project seeks to discover both the *significance* and *nature* of architecture and urban form as a part of the identity of individuals and communities.  It will question whether 'place attachment' is still a valid concept, and should look in detail at our changing notions of cultural identity, as well as concepts of place identification and community belonging, through examination of sample locations and communities in British towns and cities. The aim is not merely to look at new building proposals and urban interventions, but also at how existing and historical urban forms are being occupied and transformed by different groups for different purposes as a result of globalising forces.  It is vital to gain an understanding of the extent that the built environment plays in forming the contemporary citizen's sense of personal and social identity and whether current forms of urban morphology can have any bearing on what Melvin Webber describes as:

*"Dynamic, locational patterns of human communication that occur through space but transcend any given place."[4]*

In particular, the aim of the project is to move away from the abstractions and generalisations of concepts like 'globalisation' and 'identity' and 'place' – which though clearly important, could potentially trap us in eternal discussion – and instead look more particularly and empirically at localised changes happening on the ground across Britain. It is essential that we examine individuals and real communities prior to and in equal weighting to our study of urban fabric, in order to properly ascertain place significance before detailed ground work is undertaken. It is envisaged that this more contextual and situated approach to the research will not only enable the identification of significant trends and patterns in the selected sites, but also increase the predictive capacity of the research. In other words, rather than being an exercise through which to theorise general observations, here the use of theoretical discourse will be restricted to framing investigative approaches, formulating analytical rationales, and underpinning critical inquiry at various stages of the research. As such, it will not compromise the largely 'bottom-up' and collaborative approach being advocated.

Reference will be made to comparative ways in which globalising forces and cultural identity are affecting urban and suburban conditions in other countries around the world, in order to identify parallels and exemplars. However, the emphasis of this project will be to look at towns, cities and suburbs in contemporary Britain as a generalised case study – one that manifestly is part of a wider globalising network but which retains its own specific local characteristics and conditions. As Doreen Massey writes:

> *'The global is in the local in the very process of the formation of the local.[5]'*

**Some of the questions which may start to arise are:**

- What concepts of cultural identity are indeed useful or viable today?
- What or who are the major influences on the construction of 'place identity' in local, regional and global contexts?
- What kinds of further changes are globalising forces likely to provoke?
- How is our built environment likely to change as a result?
- Can traditional notions of public space and urban form still hold any sway in the formation of individual identity, or have they become redundant?
- How far can stylistic decisions help to embed architecture into a community identity?

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[4] M. Webber (1964), The Urban Place and the Nonplace Urban Realm, Community Without Propinquity.
[5] Doreen Massey (1994), *Space, Place, Gender*, p.120.

- Is 'community' indeed still a valid notion given the emergence of such complex cultural and globalised contexts?
- What kinds of opportunities are now being made available in these complex cultural contexts that may not have been available previously?
- What can individuals or community agencies bring to bear upon the shaping of the built environment within a globalised context?

## *Case Studies*

The urban experiences of the wider British public, not just the sectional interests of architects or building professionals, are crucial to this research project. Hence the research strategy will be to select a broad range of locations to highlight the scope of the changes now taking place, and by doing so, to bring in as many different ethnic and social groups as possible to help with the analysis. It is also desirable that the range of areas covers both the urban, suburban and exurban conditions in order to be able to recognise any distinct characteristics of each.

*A Major Urban Metropolis*
1/   London – selected because it is the major metropolis in Britain, and one of the leading 'global cities'

*A Deprived Area*
2/   Liverpool – a major port city which has experienced significant economic decline for many decades, the most deprived district in the UK according to the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG).

*A Post Industrial City*
3/   Glasgow (Govan) – a major example of a post-industrial city which now mixes areas of considerable wealth and extensive poverty. (*Possibility to collaborate with University of Strathcylde whose postgraduate students will be carrying out extensive research into the Govan area of Glasgow in 2009/10).*

*A Parallel Community*
4/   Bradford/Oldham/Burnley – post-industrial towns that have undergone a major social transformation largely due to mass immigration, classic examples of parallel communities where the population is effectively segregated along ethnic, cultural and faith lines.

*An Ethnically Homogenous Town*
5/   Easington/Oldham – according the Office for National Statistics, Easington the least racially diverse town in the UK, 99.2% white in 2001, Oldham is 86.1% white.

*Suburbia*
6/ Milton Keynes – the last of the post-war New Towns, and somewhere which is often identified as a classic suburban location

*A New New Town*
7/ Ebbsfleet/New Islington – the former an emerging agglomeration in the 'Thames Gateway', and which is being transformed by the Channel Tunnel, Bluewater, etc. The later a highly branded regeneration project officiated by the government under the 'Millennium Communities' directive.

*A Clone Town*
8/ Exeter/Dumfries/Stafford/Middlesbrough/Western-super-Mare – according to the New Economics Foundation's 2004 survey into the growing homogeneity of British towns, these are the top 5 'clone towns' in the UK

*An Information Town*
9/ Reading/Bracknell/Slough – towns in the Thames Valley whose information technology industries have seen rapid growth and are home to some of the world's largest technology companies. (*Possibility to collaborate with Vincent Lacovara and Geoff Shearcroft at London Metropolitan University whose undergraduate students will be carrying out extensive research into the Thames Valley in 2009/10*).

*A Market/Cathedral Town*
10/ Winchester/Cambridge/Aylesbury/Edinburgh – highly desirable places to live, the sorts of towns that top 'most popular' lists of places people most want to live - with strong historic connections and distinctive architecture.

*[These locations are by no means fixed in stone, but are indicated here more to demonstrate the spread and types of research locations that would be involved in the research project].*


The sample area for each case study would not be fixed, and could be flexible enough to encompass as little or as much is felt to be representative on a case by case basis. However, samples of much larger than 1km by 1km would need to be taken on with caution, as the ability to properly analyse the urban fabric could be compromised.  It would be interesting if the case studies featured a range of different scale analysis, as perception and experience of identity may vary with the scale we consider.

## *Methodology and Structure*

The structure of the project is split into two phases; the first phase is to be carried out by Building Futures with the guidance of the steering group and will essentially involve testing the methodology and setting up a framework for the bulk of the research. The second stage will involve a range of collaborating institutions who will carry out the main body of research with the support of Building Futures.

**Summary of Process:**

*First Stage: Building Futures*

1/      Initial desktop research by Building Futures will refine the questions posed and objectives of the project towards a focus group proposal. This proposal would set out the methodology for a test focus group to be carried out by Building Futures in collaboration with Murray Fraser and Samir Pandya at Westminster University. The focus group consultation would aim to gather information about identity as individuals and within a community and to discover what significance their place of residence or use, or other place, has on this identity, taking groups from existing sources such as community groups, online networks, and existing research focus groups. The aim of the test focus group would be refine the methodology and provide some initial findings to further advance the project.

2/      Analysis of findings by core team at Building Futures and project steering group;

3/      Dissemination of the preliminary findings, in the form of a public debate or forum, with the aim of gaining interest and momentum before the bulk of the research is carried out.

4/      Refinement of focus group methodology and framework for replicating research carried out by Building Futures.

*Second Stage: Collaborating Institutions*

5/      Selection of *six academic or public institutions* gathered to carry out main body of research. Each team to meet for an initial session in order to establish how the methodology framework can be adapted to fit the particular institution. Also, selection of a sample test area of a size deemed appropriate according to the specific area being examined, this should not exceed much more than 1 km x 1km;

6/      Main body of research carried out under the framework set out by Building Futures, who would work with the institutions to carry out:

a) Case study focus group research, (methodology to follow in later document)
b) Case study site research, (see below for methodology).

The research would be led by the institutions, but would have the continuous input from Building Futures in order to try and maintain some level of regularity. The initial research carried out in the earlier stages might be used by the institutions as a basis to apply for funding from bodies like the Engineering & Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) or Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

7/ Written texts will be produced to explain and contextualise the research findings from each location;

8/ All of these reports, maps, diagrams, drawings and models will be presented to Building Futures who would coordinate the production of an overview of the research and subsequent analysis.

9/ The research will be disseminated by Building Futures in a format deemed suitable, (see section 'Output').


Site Analysis/Case Study Methodology


1/ A full complement of existing physical and sociological maps obtained in advance for the selected sample area;

2/ A full set of socio-economic, ethnographical, demographic etc. data will be collected for the sample area;

3/ Localised patterns of mass migration and community formation will be detected and analysed for the sample area, both in terms of historical and contemporary time periods;

4/ Comprehensive visual recording is then to be made of all the buildings and urban spaces found in the sample area, primarily through photography, sketches, digital modelling, sound recordings, etc.;

5/ Preliminary analysis will be undertaken to identify the major globalising forces and other issues of cultural identity in the given locality;

6/ Through the use of standard methodologies from the social sciences, a spectrum of local architects, planners and building professionals will be consulted about the major changes happening, or proposed, which will alter the physical environment in the sample area;

7/ Maps, diagrams, drawings and models will then be created to show the kinds of 3D spatial changes happening in the sample area;

# *Outputs*

As yet the output is not defined, as the scale and scope of the findings will help to suggest a suitable output during the later stages.  A compact and manageable output might be a small publication in a similar vein to previous Building Futures projects, or a website/blog/Ning. At a more ambitious scale, and if the project were to receive significant funding, a single overall book containing all the research and analysis from the case study locations could be produced. In addition to either output, the core members from each research team will be expected to write essays for academic journals, professional journals and the wider press to explain and explore further the findings from the project. A small exhibition about the research project and its findings could potentially be put on at somewhere like the RIBA, and then travel around the country, perhaps visiting locations near to each case study area in order to give the community an opportunity to view the work.

*Potential Outputs:*

1/	**Website/blog/Ning** set up by Building Futures could document all the research and analysis from the project, and provide a platform for members of the team and the Building Futures steering/advisory groups to discuss the issues raised.  Beyond the remit of the project, the website could stay active and become open to the public – allowing open debate and discussion around the material gained from research.  Members of the steering and advisory groups could be responsible for regularly adding material, comments and provocations.  The site could begin to work in a similar way to popular sites such as Dezeen or BLDGBLG, who post work and ideas from others in order to stimulate discussion.
	Another possible online output as touched on in the methodology section would be to pool online community groups on one website or forum that could act as an outlet to discuss identity related issues – sharing and exchanging ideas from different localities. This could also act as a resource for professionals and academics.

2/	**A publication** of a similar scale to Building Future's universities project could be produced to document the research carried out. It could feature essays and provocations from the core team and other interested collaborators. A series of future scenarios could help to push the project into the realm of futures thinking – an analysis of current conditions although essential, needs to be pushed in order to gain useful insights. The scenarios could be the personal provocations of those contributing, imagining the effect on identity formation of extreme future conditions.

3/	**A debate series** that captured the essential provocations of the research and presented its findings on a public platform to stimulate debate.  The

scope of the project would lend itself to a series or 'season' of debates, each focusing on a different aspect of the research. This would be an invaluable way for the project to gain attention and momentum, and could precede the final output.

4/  **A designer's tool-kit** that captured the findings of the research and presented them in an accessible format suitable for dissemination to architects and/or architectural students.  This output would aim to provide guidance for designing within a globalised context, offering a range of tools to modify defunct or failing design techniques identified during the research.  It would aim to provide architects with a deeper understanding of the effect their interventions can have on the identity of a community, and for designing with cultural sensitivity. The toolkit could have two versions, one for professionals and one for students. The format of the toolkit could be a set of cards or a game in a similar vein to previous Building Futures projects, (The Urban Futures Game and the Building Futures Game). It could also feature a dictionary of defined terms that would help to reduce the frequent confusion of ideas through terminological differences.

5/  **A 'placeless places' tool-kit** that provided a set of tools for building back positive associations and identity in a place that is lacking them.  This would follow a similar model to the Hoogvleit WIMBY, (Welcome in My Backyard). This project carried out a 'creative analysis' of a failing suburb of Rotterdam, focusing on teasing out positive associations that either lay hidden or unnoticed -and worked to accentuate them.  New interventions and plans were made and have begun to be implemented. Our version could provide case study examples from places in the UK where identity has been successfully built back into the fabric of a community. A lexicon of tools, techniques and examples could provide a valuable guide to applying these principles to failing or identity-less places- to be disseminated to both designers and planners.

6/  **A major publication** in the form of a book could be a potential output if a source of considerable funding was secured.  The book would need to have original content and ideally an original format so as not to join the countless other volumes on similar topics.  A photography heavy book that perhaps documented the case study areas in a contemporary way, characterising people and places (alongside text), could potentially open up the book to a broader range of readers.  Other formats and content should be considered.

7/  **An exhibition** that was launched in London at the RIBA, and then travelled to other locations – particularly those that featured in the research, would allow a broad dissemination of the work.  The exhibition could potentially feature a range of different mediums, from film and

photography to more traditional analytical modes of representation with the hope of engaging a range of professionals and members of the public. Installations in the style of artist Jeremy Deller, who is concerned with localism and place, could add a more dynamic, informal approach.