

# THE STUDY OF LOCAL DISTINCTIVENESS – THROUGH TANGIBLE & INTANGIBLE ASPECTS OF URBAN SPACES

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## Abstract

Local distinctiveness is the sustainable aspects that make a place special and different from another. The homogenizing effect of Globalization is affecting the individuality of places, removing the unique characteristics that differ one place from another. Consequently cities and towns in different regions started to look similar, destinations are perceived as similar leaving no unique experience to seek for tourism or even for locals. Each place needs to be unique than any other, to emphasize its identity and uniqueness in the pursuit of economic, environmental and socio-psychological advantage. It is, therefore, important to define what Local Distinctiveness is and understand its relation with image formation. This study measures its potential in Fouad Street through the evaluation of existing elements of distinctiveness. Methods include structured and unstructured measuring techniques.

**Keywords:** - Alexandria, Common Ground, Fouad Street, Image of Place, Local Distinctiveness.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Places are different from each other. Each place has its own richness that is filled with sensibilities and dynamics, they are an experience and stories told by layers of history and nature that intertwine. When meaning clings to buildings, streets and trees, they form places we know when we are in them, with their qualities that are only related to conditions of locality.

This has been termed Local Distinctiveness, a term explored and developed by the organization of Common Ground. And this concept is interesting because here in Egypt we recognize the importance of diversity and uniqueness, yet we have been facing a massive homogenization effect bleaching the richness of our lives.

Focusing on those aspects of distinctiveness which single out one place from another give it both social and economic advantage and can enhance local people's quality of life.

In this context the study is done to identify the characteristics and elements that are capable of performing a leading role in recognizing a place. Whereas the distinctiveness is strong it requires conservation, and where it is weak it requires restoration or more radical measures.

## 2. LOCAL DISTINCTIVENESS

### 2.1 Definition

Local implies neighborhood or place; Distinctiveness is about particularity in the buildings, history and nature. There is not only one definition for Local Distinctiveness, many sources have defined it but all available definitions

revolve around the same meaning. Some of these definitions are:

- "Local Distinctiveness is described as an elusive concept. Essentially, it encompasses the unique physical, social and economic characteristics of a place and the interaction of people with those characteristics"[1]
- "Distinctiveness is the quality of being individual. The aspects of Local Distinctiveness are which single one place out from its peers."[2]

A deduced definition can be: Local distinctiveness is the **sustainable aspects** that can be found individually or together in combination, contributing to the **sense of place** that can be sustained or that evolve or change, which make a place **special** and **different** from another.

### 2.2 Development

Two key factors resulted in the interest and quest for local distinctiveness Which are: globalization and the economic advantage.

In the latter half of the 20th century Globalization started to attract global attention, yet the term is used in so many different contexts. Anthony Giddens – the British modern sociologist- has described globalization as "the intensification of worldwide relations that link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa"[3]. In that sequence "A series of social, political and economic changes that affect everything from the operation of nations to everyday life come under the collective title of 'globalisation'"[4]. It implies the opening of local and

nationalistic perspectives to worldwide movements of an interconnected and interdependent world.

Consequently, architecture corresponded very quickly to the effect of globalization, as we understand architecture as a natural reflection of the current social, political and economic issues. Many architects started to argue that the modern age demanded a different architecture in response to the new technologies, industries, social and political orders. Thus the international style was born. [3]

Glossy facades with innovative new materials showed up in many cities changing their skylines, the trend of standardization has become international, notice we can now see a building in New York city with a similar in Dubai, as the same building methods, materials, and styles are applied; the resemblance between the cities started to grow [3]. It resulted in all homogenization, and within the last few years globalization has become associated with a loss of place identity in architecture. [5]

The opposing force of anti-global as a consequence of Globalization has emerged, It supports historical continuity, cultural diversity and preservation of identity.[3]Common Ground is an organization which has set up a campaign to celebrate Individuality of places as a counter move to the homogenizing effect of Globalization. [6]

Furthermore, when cities and towns in different regions started to look similar, the unique characteristics that differ one place from another has no longer existed, leaving no unique experience to seek for tourism or even for locals. While the unique experience of places is a main factor for tourists to choose a destination. [6]

It was felt that each place needed to be unique than any other, to emphasize its identity and uniqueness in the pursuit of economic, environmental and socio-psychological advantage. This led the governments to attempts of shaping a unique identity and promote it on a local and international scale through place marketing.

One of the most significant challenges in tourism is to be successfully promoted in targeted markets, therefore a destination must be differentiated from its competition in the minds of the consumers. For many tourists, local distinctiveness is the main reason for the trip [7].It is, therefore, important as cities are working very hard to surpass each other and emerge as the most attractive areas for investments.[8]

This has increased the awareness of the value of uniqueness and characteristics that are capable of performing a leading role in recognizing a place for the benefits of economic advantage.

The result is an interest in 'distinctive' places, as a counter move to Globalization and for the sake of economic advantage in the increasingly competitive market in order to

enhance the quality of life of local people as well as ensuring the growth of the place through focusing on what is different, and preserving the qualities which make the place special.

### 2.3 Initiation of the Term

The term Local Distinctiveness was coined by Common Ground Organization in 1983, to promote for the need to recognize and appreciate the richness of individual places Common Ground is a tiny organization which was founded in the 1980's in United Kingdom and since then it has been seeking ways to engage people with their local environment, and inspiring people and communities to protect and promote whatever is distinctive about a place. [9]

For thirty years, their ultimate goal is to connect people with their local environment through music, art exhibitions, film-making, publishing, community gatherings and education, creating the inspiration and some of the tools that can help communities make meaningful, long-lasting connections with their home ground. They believe that People can make a positive difference to their own localities. [9]

Common Ground's prime objective is to understand what is important locally and identify the cultural heritage that should be recognized and valued. The focus of Common Ground's message is that "local distinctiveness is essentially about places and our relationship with them. It is as much about valuing the common place as the rare". [10]

They began to campaign for the celebration and promotion of what is locally particular in the natural and built environment. They explain that, "Distinctiveness is about particularity, it is rehearsed in the buildings and land shapes, the brooks and birds, trees and cheeses, places of worship and pieces of literature. It is about continuing history and nature jostling with each other, layers and fragments, old and new" [9].

### 3. BUILDING AN IMAGE

People and places are intimately connected by a bond that is not a physical entity. each place has a distinctive identity of its own that is drawn by a self-constructed image. an intangible value that is added to the entity by the individual's mind. Image formation is related fundamentally to the study of local distinctiveness, therefore, a brief examination of image and perceptions is mandatory, though the process of identifying different perceptions is different from identifying different kinds of values and qualities.

'Image' is defined as being a person's beliefs, ideals, feelings, expectations and impressions about a place. "a distinct way of processing and storing multisensory information in working memory" [7]. Image of place is derived from either personal experience or secondary information sources including personal conversation or the mass media. This is often described as mental picturing, although sight is not the only sensory included but can

include any or all the senses- smell, taste, sight, hearing and touch.

MacInnis and Price suggest that places are perceived by individual attributes and holistic impressions, meaning processing of information depends upon a combination of holistic methods of representing information and the contrast of information on individual features or attributes. while Echtner and Ritchie noticed a distinction between the functional and psychological components of image, the functional characteristics are defined as directly observable or measurable (tangible aspects), whereas psychological characteristics cannot be directly measured (intangible aspects).[7]

Moreover, the image can be based on common functional and psychological features or based on unique features, events, feelings or auras. And that is an additional dimension of image as indicated by Figure1.

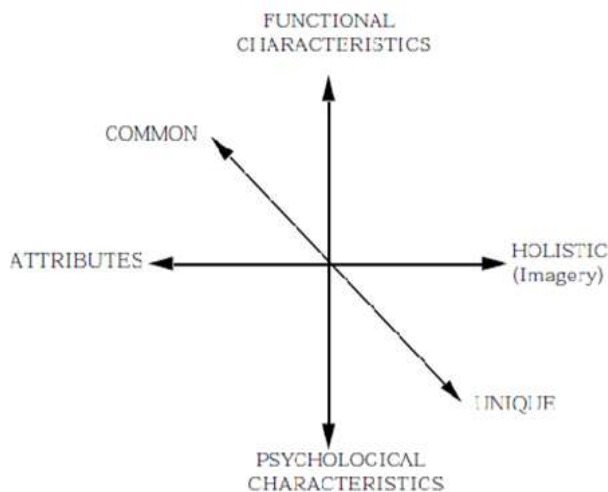


Fig -1: Components of image

A one dimensional analysis methodology would be easy to achieve through traditional methods of analysis but would not acknowledge the richness and complexity of the urban environment. The measurement of image would have to involve methodologies to include perceptions of individual's functional and psychological attributes, in addition to measuring the holistic impressions.

**4. LOCAL DISTINCTIVENESS ELEMENTS**

Local distinctiveness primarily consists of five main elements, which can either be found in combination or, exceptionally, alone:

1. Natural features
2. Man-made structures
3. Cultural identity and people
4. Food, drink and crafts
5. Industry and business

To facilitate understanding of the complex elements a devised classification of the elements can be; **Core elements** of distinctiveness and **Dynamic elements** of distinctiveness.[2]

Core elements of distinctiveness are the natural physical features of the place and the man-made structures or built fabric of the settlement. These slow changing elements form the foundation of uniqueness. While Dynamic elements of distinctiveness are related to people themselves and their activities. These elements create change and unlike the core elements can allow the place to have the capacity to be modified or reinvent distinctiveness.[2]

Table -1: Elements of Local Distinctiveness

	Elements of Local Distinctiveness	Include
Core Elements	Natural Features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Location</li> <li>- Topography</li> <li>- Natural Landscape</li> <li>- Habitat</li> <li>- Coastline</li> <li>- Native Plants</li> <li>- Natural Materials</li> </ul>
	Man-made Features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Historic Features</li> <li>- Townscape</li> <li>- Buildings</li> <li>- Monument</li> <li>- Transportation</li> </ul>
Dynamic Elements	Cultural Identity & People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Event</li> <li>- Language</li> <li>- Tradition</li> <li>- Famous Person</li> <li>- Dressing</li> <li>- Music</li> </ul>
	Food, Drink & Crafts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Craft</li> <li>- Artifact</li> <li>- Food</li> <li>- drink</li> </ul>
	Industry & Business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Manufacturing Cultural Industries</li> <li>- Land uses &amp; Activities</li> </ul>

The elements are so many and diverse that many places can lay the claim to being 'distinctive', however, it involves not only variety, and not only diversity, but use them both interchangeably. The idea of the whole being greater than the sum of parts and most importantly that these elements are interlinked and not separate entities.[11]

## 5. THE MEASURING TECHNIQUES

From the previous, it is now evident that in order to evaluate the elements of distinctiveness they should be envisioned through capturing the components of image, both attribute based and holistic as conceptualized in Figure 1, each of these components has functional or more tangible and psychological or more intangible characteristics.

In order to capture all of these components the measurement has to adopt two basic methodologies: structured and unstructured measuring techniques.

Structured methodologies are measuring attributes, while making the respondent think about the place in terms of specified attributes after an extensive research and analysis to ensure that all elements of distinctiveness are covered, and specify them into a standardized scale and is rated by the respondent, then results can be analyzed using statistical techniques.[7]

Unstructured methodologies are measuring holistic components and also more effective in capturing the unique features and auras. This methodology uses free form descriptions while the attributes are not specified but the respondent is allowed to freely describe his impressions through open-ended survey questions, results then can be sorted and categorized.[7]

## 6. THE CASE STUDY OF FOUAD STREET

Fouad Street is located in the city center of Alexandria, Egypt. It was named after King Fouad I, and it is one of the most important streets in the city of Alexandria, it features a number of landmarks, investment institutions, art houses, museums and old florist shops[12]. The street goes back to Ptolemaic era -3rd century BC- and now of course it had undergone many changes but is still a throwback to a cosmopolitan city where art and architecture were flourishing, and it is one of the few places left in the city with most of its heritage buildings still intact, despite the new buildings and overcrowded urban center. [13]

### 6.1 Character & Developments

Fouad Street is known for the features of the Greek style mixed with Florentine Italian architecture[12]. In addition to the national museum and Opera House, along the street stood Serapis Temple long time ago, the same place that housed the Mohamed Ali club and now is a cultural center. Greek, Italian, French, Armenian and Jewish families owned villas along the beautiful street before their migration. The elegant villas, antique and florist shops, all symbols of Alexandria's grand history, are still standing in Fouad Street.[14]



Fig -2: Different architectural eras meet in this street



Fig -3: Alexandria's opera house

Unfortunately, some of the heritage buildings were affected by improper restorations or painted with odd colors that made them lose their originality[12]. In addition to some destructions of old buildings and part of the city's heritage and history were lost. The situation needed an intervention to save the city's heritage, the focus was on the city center that represents the heart of old Alexandria as a start which is Fouad street.[13]

"The logical method to preserve historical buildings is to make them profitable. For instance: after some restaurants opened in Fouad Street the rent of shops there increased. The owners of the surrounding buildings started regarding them as investment opportunities instead of a burden they want to get rid of." Said Zeyad El Sayad, Assistant Professor of Architectural Engineering. Sigma, a company with a branch that has been investing in heritage building, is working to preserve the heritage and turning it into a profit at the same time.[13]

The company's vision is briefly adding the elements and activities that can revitalize the heritage buildings to merge them with the present while preserving their identity, in

order to make the heritage buildings a primary elements of the urban fabric connecting the past with the present in addition to economic advantages.[15]

The street witnessed a number of building restorations, new developments and new activities through replacement of the ground floor old occupations. People started to visit Fouad street all over again and see it as an interesting destination.



Fig -4: L-passage project by sigma



Fig -5: The night life of Fouad street

The study should provide an objective assessment of the street's local distinctiveness to provide a policy base for management, protection and enhancements in the study area. Also, significant changes have been undergone to the street in the past years, the study is assessing the impact of the new developments to the street's distinctive character to help ensure their appropriateness and the capacity for new developments.

In order to produce character assessment for Fouad street the methodology used subjective views of people perceptions as well as objective criteria of urban analysis to create an integrated and holistic output.

### 6.2 People & Perception

The survey was designed to explore the perception of a range of local people as well as external perceptions, both attribute based and holistic impressions through free form questions to give the respondent the opportunity to freely describe what is significant in the place in his opinion and then rating its significant.

The survey consisted of one page questionnaire which dealt with:

- 1) Whether the respondent is living in Alexandria
- 2) Whether the respondent is a visitor or locally based in Fouad street
- 3) How unique is Fouad street in his opinion
- 4) Factors/ attributes that make Fouad street distinctive
- 5) Respondents were asked to provide adjectives to describe the street before and after the new developments, and how it should be in future

The results of this survey were:

85% of respondents are living in Alexandria, and only 18% are living or used to live in Fouad street. 85% stated that the street is "Very unique", 13% ranked it as "Probably different" whereas only 2% described it as "Nothing special".

Respondents were asked to list things they thought were significant or distinctive in the street, the result was a variety of most of elements of local distinctiveness. The most mentioned elements were man-made features, including building's architecture and historic features, followed by industry and business while other elements were also mentioned.

Significant Elements
Architectural styles
Historic features
Pavements and Walkability
National Museum
Opera House
Florist Shops
Restaurants
Antique Shops
L Passage
Lighting
Location
The Old City Hall
Kom El Dekka Stairs
Vegetation
Recreational Areas

Moreover when respondents were asked to provide adjectives to describe the street before the developments negative and positive words were used almost equally, but when respondents described the street after developments 75% used positive words, of course when asked how it should be all responses were positive and aspirational. The descriptions then were sorted into 5 themes.

Ran k	Theme	Typical Words
1st	Vibrancy	alive, vibrant, dead
2nd	Diversity	activities, different ages, landuses
3rd	Identity/ Image	unique, culture,

		history
4th	Maintenance/ Management	clean, development
5th	Accessibility	Pedestrian friendly, safe

This analysis reflects the distinctiveness of Fouad street, and illustrates the positive and negative qualities of the street in addition to the effect of the new developments on the street's image, also analyzing public perceptions can provide how their perceptions might impact future developments, for example people loved the new diversity the street offered but at the same time nobody wants the noise and congestion. Further research should cover identification of land use patterns in the street and their effect on character.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The previous can come with the conclusion that local distinctiveness is about the idea that anyone can use it to demonstrate the valuables of their place to everyone else. Understanding the value of the elements of local distinctiveness, achieving the connection between all of the available elements and coordinating the activities, agencies and institutes responsible for them; will result in economic benefits and reflect positively on the locals lives.

Moreover, policies could be developed to promote understanding of the place's natural and built environment in order to ensure sustainable and innovative future growth. Contributions to local distinctiveness need to respond positively to the historic environment context and reinforcing the distinctive character through appropriate sustainable development.

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