

Name : Alan Shadap

Student Number: 4718755

MSc Architecture and the Built Environment - Urbanism track

Reflection for the P4 report

The graduation topic which is called 'The future of informal pathways – Reinforcing the identity of public space in hilltowns' is to define the tangible and intangible aspects of the informal paths of Shillong, India and to use these aspects to revive the pathways as the social infrastructure of the city.

The relationship between research and design

The aim of the project was to achieve a renewed value for the informal pedestrian streets of hilltowns to facilitate a better quality of public space for one of the oldest townships of Shillong city, a hilltown in the North Eastern part of India.

The first aspect of the thesis was to establish what are the attributes to value while considering a renewal strategy. This is where the research plays a crucial role in establishing guidelines on which to judge what aspects to keep, to improve or to change and do away with. The spatial analysis done through mental mapping of the context helped uncover the imageable aspects of the physical environment of the research area. Interviews and observations of the site also helped to establish what aspects of the pedestrian street networks are valued by the residents and what elements are missing.

Secondly, the research incorporated a framework of using the activity, form and meaning as aspects of identity and these helped work as a tool for the design itself. One aspect of the thesis was to uncover what was heritage in the pedestrian networks and what intangible and tangible aspects of the streets contribute to the identity whether it was in the activities of the street, the physical form of the street or the meaning associated with the street. Hence, based on these attributes revealed through the framework and using the observations and interviews a renewal strategy was able to be proposed which helps strengthened the identity of these street networks.

The framework of form, activity and meaning have been useful for the purposes of this project because they look at the tangible and intangible aspects of the informal paths. The deterioration of the quality of these informal paths have been a result of the changing form of the urban built fabric which resulted in the negligence in the form of these informal paths. It has also resulted in the decline of use of these informal paths as the social spaces for interaction among residents. The decline of usage of the public water systems have resulted in the loss of meaning of these spaces. Hence, it is for these reasons that this framework was a useful method to study area. This framework helps better evaluate the performance of the informal pathways with respect to place making in these pathways.

Finally, place attachment theory is closely linked with place identity. Hence, this was used as a tool to evaluate how well inhabitants were linked to such places. Place attachment is a connection between a person and the environmental setting and the more a place is designed to cater to a person's needs the more attached a person will feel to a place and with it a place starts to develop a certain identity to an individual or a community. Place attachment theory helps identify place attachment constructs that can be used as an indicator for assessment of the design aspects. Certain aspects of a place can add attachment for an individual whether it

be the meaning, the physical form of the place or the activity which occurs in the place. Thus, higher attachment to a place results in a stronger meaning and image of a place which leads to a stronger identity.

It was important to have a design because some of the aspects one comes across while designing can be related back into the research. For example, the technical aspects of the design which may seem quite insignificant proved to be a very important aspect which could be related back to the framework of form, activity and meaning. What the water purification system meant to the form of these informal paths and how the physical form of it shaped the meaning of the place. Therefore, the act of making the design allows one to reflect on all the aspects and relate it back to the research as a guidance.

The design in a way provided inspiration and clues on what aspects of the real-world problems could be better integrated back in to the theoretical framework to come to the best possible desirable future solution.

The relationship between the theme of the graduation lab, the Urbanism track and the subject study chosen by the student within this framework(location/object)

The History and Heritage vector studio helps look at what value can heritage give to the place making. The pedestrian pathways of hilltowns is a perfect example to study the social, spatial and cultural aspects related to heritage as these pathways are constantly undergoing change through time. These streets are the realms where social and cultural ties are made contribute immensely to the wellbeing of the community. The spatial character of these streets is also vital to facilitate grounds for communication and interaction among community members. Thus, heritage as a tool for preserving some of the qualities of these streets helps foster growth in terms of social ties among neighbours.

The change in the social structure because of moving away of the generations old families of the neighbourhood and coming up of the multi storied building apartments have resulted in the loss of value of the in between spaces. As an urbanism student this research looks at how heritage can add a positive value to the public spaces in hill areas and result in a continuity of the values of a community. The revival of these streets as the social spaces of the city will create better living conditions which improves on social interactions with neighbours thereby helping to reduce and prevent the migration of these families away from these areas. Although that being said the migration of these families away from these areas is not only the quality of the space but also the job opportunities elsewhere. However, these interventions could add a positive point to retaining the social structure of the neighbourhood.

In the field of urbanism, the subject touches on the smallest scale of individual and local aspects, how locals can benefit from these public water taps as hubs of social activities and touches on the broader context of how the community can collectively value this network of public water systems as network of pedestrian life and public realm.

Elaboration on research method and approach chosen by the student in relation to the methodical line of inquiry, reflecting thereby upon the scientific relevance of the work

The approach stems from finding urban place identity in the informal pathways of hilltowns. In this research a framework was created to define identity. This is based on the form, activity and meaning of a place which thus helps create a framework for research, analysis and design.

This research integrates several theories from the place identity to place attachment. These theories helped analyze the various attributes of the informal streets as well as the assets present in the local context in order to further implement them in the design proposal.

Spatial analysis through mapping of the topography and typology of street networks and pathways helped further define the research areas and the different locations on which to implement the design proposals.

Literature review on the different theories related to place attachment and place theory help define certain parameters on which to assess the design of the project. This was very useful in order to work as a base from which to analyze and design the proposals.

Interviewing the residents and making mental maps of the locality based on the people's mental image of the place provided evidence on what were the most distinguishing spatial features of the neighbourhood. This method along with the interviews and observations helped review what were the aspects of the urban environment which provided the meaning aspects to the urban identity.

Elaboration on the relationship between the graduation project and the wider social, professional and scientific framework, touching upon the transferability of the project result.

In the context of Shillong a hilltown meant initially only for a small population the swelling up and growth of the city have posed huge threats to the small settlement structure of the city.

Informal streets are not uncommon in developing countries and are areas which fall prey to misuse and negligence. The framework proposed in this thesis by using identity as a catalyst to activate and reanimate these informal streets in order to redefine the future of such streets is what this research aims to achieve.

These pathways have in the past been used as a connection but also as served as a social space for neighbours to interact and mingle with each other. For example, the public taps present on the pedestrian pathways were always a source of activity for the residents. These areas also had a deeper meaning to the community since these were areas of social interactions and it also manifested itself in a physical form. Today, however, with changing times and ever-growing urban population these streets and pathways have lost importance and have merely become a physical thoroughfare. This research points to a future of these streets by giving new value and added meaning to these informal streets. The framework proposed can work towards looking at other areas which have informal pathways and using their attributes to further strengthen the identity of these streets as these are the areas where most of informal activities do happen. Other hilltowns can benefit from this framework because of similar geographical conditions. The values associated with street networks are also very common in other hilltowns hence looking at how these pedestrian pathways perform in one case could provide a base for other hill areas with similar cultural backgrounds.

Discuss the ethical issues and dilemmas you may have encountered in doing the research, elaboration of the design and the potential applications of the result in practice.

This research provided a design proposal to redefine the pedestrian street networks as a social infrastructure which contributes to the quality of life and well-being of the inhabitants. The social ties which inhabitants share with their neighbours are facilitated through these pedestrian street networks. The design prioritizes different activities which happen at different times of the day. This further improves the usage of these streets which results in a more vibrant street life.

The ever-changing character of the streets brought about by change in mobility and transport provides a challenge while discussing maintaining the pedestrian nature of these streets. Another factor creeping up is also the desire for every household to own a vehicle because of ease of transit. Due to ever increasing demands for vehicular connectivity some of these streets are widened to pave the way for vehicular traffic which diminishes

their importance takes away the informal activities and pedestrians from the streets. This does create a conflict over the pressures of accommodating all of the vehicular traffic as opposed to allowing some of these pedestrian street networks and space for the public realm. Hence, accessibility and providing adequate modes of mobility for people living in such areas will need to be looked at.

One of the aspects most apparent and prominent in the project was the introduction of renewal of the old system of public water supply. By activating these streets and bringing back the social infrastructure to the pedestrian pathways. Preserving the value of these streets will lead to a more vibrant community life and safer and more frequently used streets. However, with the increase in the population size and number of residents wanting to live closer to the city centre these small interventions will not be able to cater to the size of population moving in. Hence, further studies need to be done with regards to controlling the density of populations in such clusters and around the activity hubs.

The increase in the quality of life of the neighbourhood but also puts a threat of gentrification since the already existing condition of growth has seen the moving out of old families and coming up of the new multi storied buildings in their place. Means to control the emergence of these multi storied complexes have to be addressed also due to the fact that the region is a hilly area and is prone to other forces of nature such as soil erosion and landslides.