Visual preference dimensions of historic urban areas: The determinants for urban heritage conservation

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Challenges between urban development and heritage conservation are more critical in developing countries since new constructions threaten historic urban areas. On account of vast developments in urban areas, the so-called cultural heritage of cities, may tolerate irreversible damages, thus striking a balance is essential. The opinions of stakeholders could be a reliable reference in maintaining this balance. Therefore, the perception of the public should complement the expertise required in the conservation of historic urban areas and the development of adjacency. This paper outlines the findings of a study conducted to identify visual preferences of international tourists toward the historic centre of Kuala Lumpur as a way of passive participation. Thanks to environmental psychology and by means of an *in-situ* photograph-based survey, six visual preference dimensions were recognized that influence the perception of tourists towards the study area. In the current study, these dimensions are entitled *visual chaos*, *urban greenery*, *roadside heritage*, *historic architecture*, *connectivity* and *modernity*. Each one of these dimensions contains influential elements and features. "Content Identifying Method" carried out to identify the favourable and repulsive contents resulted in high or low preferability of each preference dimensions, respectively. It is concluded that, the surroundings of historic settings show the most neglect from conservation.

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1. Introduction

Similar to any other types of heritage properties, historic urban areas embody significant values. As spatial structures they reflect the evolution of a society as well as its distinct cultural identity. Moreover, they are integral part of a wider natural or man-made context that both must be seen distinctly (ICOMOS, 2011b). This type of heritage contains qualities including historic character, materials and spiritual elements that characterize the particularity of the area (ICOMOS, 1987). These characteristics form the distinctive image of every urban areas in particular and the identity of nations in general. In the competitive urban world nowadays, it is increasingly realized that, "the more distinctive, unique and special

a city is, the more chances it has to succeed" (Yuen, 2005: 197).

However, this remarkable legacy is threatened increasingly. The process of heritage decay is inevitable due to the post-industrial urban constructions on the one hand and the time-dependent nature of heritage on the other hand. Therefore, preservation and conservation must be considered utmost, particularly when heritage assets lie inside a fast expanding economy which causes a rapid urban development (Lee, 1996; Engelhardt, 1998; Ryberg-Webster & Kinahan, 2013). Despite long history of urban conservation dating back to the Athens Charter in 1931, the rapid growth of cities along with inappropriate conservational activities threat urban heritage more than ever.

By the same token, special attention is now paid to urban heritage conservation toward sustainability. According to Yuen (2005) urban conservation produces civic pride and economic benefit as the uniqueness of cultural heritage increases urban capability of existing or performing in harmonious or congenial combination. Furthermore, Ryberg-Webster and Kinahan (2013) demonstrated the capability of heritage preservation "as an agent of urban

change" and as a "facilitate[or for] community and economic development" (p. 119). Therefore, striking a balance between heritage conservation and urban development, targeting sustainability, is now the main challenge in growing cities (Stovel, 1999).

Heritage conservation literature supports the effective idea that historic urban conservation needs to be a coherent and integrated part in the process of socio-economic development, regional and urban planning (ICOMOS, 1987; Jokilehto, 1998; Rodwell, 2007) and is to be considered as a basis for urban planning (Sirisrisak, 2009). The formal base for this idea was promoted through the concept of "integrated conservation" during the Congress of Amsterdam in acknowledgement of European Heritage Year in 1975. European Charter concentrated upon the fact that our heritage is in danger due to "ignorance, obsolescence, deterioration of every kind and neglect" (p. 2). Therefore, an integrated conservation is severely requested, through which conservation is carried out in the regional and urban planning process (ICOMOS, 1975).

Serious attempts have been launched by the United Nations demonstrating the role of heritage and its integration in sustainable development context. It is a necessary reaction against the threats of development in various aspects on heritage and its inherent values. World Heritage Centre of UNESCO in the streaming of Vienna Memorandum (2005) has requested for application of new approaches of methodologies for urban conservation and development in the context of historic cities. It is based on a broader interpretation focussing on "human coexistence with the land and human beings in society" (UNESCO, 2005: 2). Moreover, the seventeenth general assembly of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), demanded initiations of possible strategies and solutions for contributing to heritage alongside the issues on development on (ICOMOS, 2011a).

The evolving demand for public participation in the process of urban conservation and planning is evident within the international charters of heritage conservation (ICOMOS, 1975b, 1987, 1999, 2007, 2011b; UNESCO, 2005, 2011). Their emphasis supports the notion of sustainability in a way that sustainable development could not be achieved without the involvement of communities in different levels of interventions as stressed in Agenda 21 (UNESCO, 1992). Apart from international organizations, there has been a growing tendency in the scientific world as well advocating the inclusion of people's ideas when planning for conservation areas is made (Yuen, 2005). In this regard, scholars have agreed that public participation is mandatory in achieving sustainability (Imon, 2006).

Notwithstanding the significance, feasibility of public participation in heritage conservation confronts complex issues (Yung & Chan, 2011). Among them is the diversity of stakeholder groups (Cotter, Boyd, & Gardiner, 2001) on the one hand and lack of adequate knowledge of public about heritage conservation (Coeterier, 2002) on the other hand. Disparity of power to influence the process of decision-making as well as lack of a proper mechanism to get benefit from public participation are two other issues hindering the success of public participation in heritage conservation (Arnstein, 1969; Yung & Chan, 2011). Therefore, comprehensive solutions are required to cope these fundamental issues of incorporating public participation in integrated conservation.

Passive participation of people can be proposed as a solution alternative to bridge this expanding gap. If direct or indirect interventions of public are considered as the active engagements of them, exploration of their psychological perception of environment and utilization by policy makers could be considered as their passive contribution. It is assumed to be beneficial since studies blame discrepancies between perception of professionals and public and their evaluation of historic sites as a significant factor of failure (Coeterier, 2002; Yung & Chan, 2013). Yet, it will depend of the willingness of power holders to whether advocate a bottom-up approach by involving public into the process of decision making or not.

And nowadays, due to the "evolving shifts in cultural heritage management", perception of public and their preferences has becoming progressively important (Yung & Chan, 2013). The Ename Charter (2008) for interpretation and presentation of cultural heritage sites stresses the encouragement of individuals and parties in reflecting their own perceptions of heritage areas to stimulate extra "interest, learning, experience and exploration" (ICOMOS, 2008: 4). Moreover is the landscape nature of HUL, the most recent conservational instrument by UNESCO, in which observers' point of view is essential.

This research extends previous studies which focused on the preferences of stakeholders for heritage buildings and sites. Respect to the significance of public perception for heritage conservation and to cope existing difficulties of their participation in this process, it seeks to go further by examining visual preferences of stakeholders as a product of their psychological perceptions toward historic urban areas. What are the visual preferences of public toward historic urban areas? What are the environmental characteristics of such areas that influence visual preferences of people? Exploring visual preferences of people is assumed to answer all above questions.

2. Environmental preference study

Environmental studies employ a broad spectrum of approaches to study human interaction with the environment. Based on the judgement source, the environmental studies generally fall into two broad categories of expert and public evaluations. In a diverse field of conserving natural context and landscape, the psychological perception of public was studied to identify people's evaluations of their surroundings. Methodologically, however, few studies evaluated psychological perception of public for the purpose of urban heritage conservation.

Environmental perception studies can provide understanding how people behaviour can be influenced by environment and vice versa. According to Rapoport (1977), people's evaluation of environment does relate to their affective response and judgement. Moreover, S. Kaplan and R. Kaplan (1982) argue that preference is one of the best measures for human perception because preference is a product of perception and preference judgement is made by people on their daily life. Moreover, preferences judgement is more influenced by knowledge, inherent response and cognitive process (R. Kaplan and S. Kaplan, 1982) as well as motivation, emotion and impression (Hammitt, 1978). Therefore, it can be concluded that preference as a result of perception is the collection of information about how people experience the environment (Suhardi, 2006).

The preference approach has been widely used in the studies on perception of people toward different environments or landscape for many years. This approach has proven to be valid and acceptable method (Kaltenborn & Bjerke, 2002) to uncover underlying factors effecting perceptions such as attitude, content and spatial configuration of the particular landscape (R. Kaplan & S. Kaplan, 1989a,b).

Environmental preference study uses photo questionnaire survey to obtain people preferences for particular environment. According to Woods (1995), by using preference rating system, the participants were asked to rate how much they prefer a particular environment or scenes. This process is lightly intuitive and image dependent. With the ratings system, the most preferred environment and the least preferred environment can be identified with central tendency measure of such mean scores. Further with the rating score as well, the environmental scenes can be grouped into several dimensions by using data reduction techniques. In the data reduction process, the scenes will be grouped according to similar