

Van Assche, K., Beunen, R., & Duineveld, M. (Eds.). (2023). *Elgar Encyclopedia in Urban and Regional Planning and Design*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

## **Identity**

Martijn Duineveld, Kristof Van Assche, Raoul Beunen, Editors

### **Introduction**

Planning and design can respect or disrespect, recognize or disregard identity. They can also support and build identity. Except for the most pure versions of modernism, most versions of planning and design imagine a relation with identity. The identity prioritized can be a spatial identity, where the concept of genius loci or spirit of the place, is an important part of the traditions of landscape and garden design. The identity that becomes relevant can also be cultural identity, religious identity or other group identities. Then, especially since the Baroque period, and even more so the age of nationalism, there is the use of spatial planning and design to express and create national identity.

The different disciplines and traditions of planning and design have their own relation to identity in its different aspects. In a sense, each practical organization of space expresses the identity of a culture or community. It does not always do so intentionally. What is also possible is that a set of reasons shaped the appearance of a city, after which this appearance became a symbol for the culture which built it. Greek cities thus became 'Greek', and the result of a Greek recipe, after a long period of experimentation, diversity, and of other considerations operating in city planning and design. This could include religious, esthetic, political and economic reasons, which altogether made for a particular urban form which satisfied the ancient Greeks in their network state, and which allowed for relatively easy reproduction for the establishment of new colonies.

### **Ascription and exclusion**

The Greek example also indicates what anthropology knew for a long time, i.e., that the ascription of identity by outsiders differs from internal ascriptions. What looks like a typical French village for a Swede might look like a mess or like nothing special for the French inhabitants. What looks like a deliberate expression of French values for the Swede might appear to be just a result of a 'normal' practical organization, or, a failure of achieving an ideal which is not perceived by the Swede. Our invoking of 'normal' indicates the presence of naturalization in many cultures and in many forms of spatial organization: what is contingent, a result of the choices and evolutions, of power relations and economic relations in a community, is presented as natural. This process, too, can be intentional or unintentional.

If we, with Benedict Anderson, consider nations as imagined communities, and nation states as enterprises of concentration of power and resources, then it looks rather logical that processes of naturalization of contingent forms of organization, expression are part of nation building. Nation- building might have started as a process of self- organization, but the formation of nation states led to attempts to build identities, to create narratives of unity of culture, history, uniformity of spatial organization (or, a unity in diversity), of particular values which could be expressed in cities, villages, in administration and many other ways. Model citizens could be created by imposing religion, language, unified legal and taxation systems, infrastructures leading to a capital city, borders which had to be guarded and an outside which had to be constructed as different.

This, of course, immediately creates many internal Others, as well as an external Other. State-led planning was, from its inception, sensitive to this double problem of Othering. The modernist drive towards unity, towards a spatial grammar which could happily ignore all sorts of identity, its obsessions with spatial structure representing a supposedly rational organization of the land, did not solve this problem. It might have ignored nationalism in principle, but intensified its patterns of exclusion of alternatives, by not seeing or downgrading all of those alternative spatial identities. For modernism, culture was still a reality, just as nation states were a reality, but they were simply not relevant for the organization of space. A rational city would be legible and usable for all.