Culture, Space, and Place: An İnquiry into the Urban Landscape of Multicultural Cities

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Abstract

The social landscape of most of the European cities is rapidly changing from single to multiple cultural communities under the influence of globalisation and human movement. Such a rapid change has moved the concept of singularity from the many discourses on the socio-cultural, economic and physical aspect of the city to a more complex cross-cultural dialogue. On the socio-cultural dimension, the subject of social cohesion and social inclusion has become an important issue concerning many cities. In the main, these issues have been analysed through social, economic and political science perspectives. The influence of the built environment as an important factor in determining cultural and ethical identity has been inadequately addressed. The paper reviews selected theoretical concepts to verify the exact meaning of culture, cultural identity, social space and social spatiality in the context of different ethnic societies. These issues are then examined in the context of Muslim ethnic neighbourhoods in Birmingham to find out how these cultural factors can contribute to the integration or segregation of its society? The paper concludes how the understanding of cultural norms can contribute to the development of an alternative approach for planning and regeneration practice.

Keywords: Culture, Identity, cultural landscape, social cohesion.

1. Introduction:

Urban populations of most of the multicultural cities in Europe include three distinct communities. The first one is the original community, second are the migrants from developing countries and third are migrants from European countries. The social transformation of these cities from a single to multiple cultures has had an impact on the urban landscape and social cohesion of the city. There is a general view that cultural background, ethnicity and income foster both integration and separation of social groups. These factors on one hand foster formation of cultural/ethnic clusters maximising group social interaction, on the other hand, they separate and distinct groups from each other (Duncan& Leg, 1993; Gilbert & Gugler, 1992; Rapoport, 1997). Grouping and locations of ethnic groups in the city, therefore, reflects not only income but to a larger extent cultural values and preference (Newman 1972; Agnew, 1984). In some cases, grouping allows the resetting of public spaces to a further increase the possibility of performing their cultural behaviour. This resetting generates further argument concerning the determinism and possibilism views (Betchtel, 1997; Lang, 1987; Carter, 1983; Rapoport, 1976 & 1984) regarding the man and environment interaction in the context of 3 multicultural society. As we see in the case study in this paper, the possibilities are not for changing the behaviour, but rearranging the built environment or using it in such a way to suit cultural behaviour.

Approaches to address social problems in the multicultural cities have mostly been taken in the context of political discourses uttering the idea of integration and, in some countries prohibiting the practice of the ethnic cultural norms. The influence of the built environment as an important factor contributing to the formation of a harmonious urban society through the representation of cultural and ethical identities of various societies has not been paing attention. This has changed the social landscape of most of the multicultural cities to include a variety of segregated ethnic communities. One consequence of this is that many communities especially the youth, feel invisible, ignored and detached from both their ethnic identity and the urban community they live in.

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The paper aims to highlight how to address this problem through the development of shared urban identity increasing the sense of belonging for all cultural groups. The paper starts with presenting short reviews of the definition of three phenomena of culture, identity, and place. It explores the complex concept of culture, identifying its structural principles, their rules and values and their dominant forces regulating social behaviour and forming the cultural identity. It demonstrates how religion principle, for certain cultural groups act as a dominating force regulating their social behaviour and representing their identity. These clarify why for some people culture and identity are fixed and cannot be changed. This is followed by the discussion on space and place in relation to culture, time, space and the notion of spatiality to demonstrate the cultural dimension of space. The case study focuses on analysing the transformation of the urban landscape of public places within the Muslim ethnic neighborhoods in response to their socio-cultural norms. And finally, the paper recommends an informed approach to urban planning and regeneration in response to cultural requirements.

2- Culture, Identity and Place

2.1 Culture:

The complex concept of culture has been defined from varying points of view in many disciplines. And since all these definitions expressing the social character of people, one could find a common ground shared by all. The paper starts to review some of these definitions briefly in order to define a cultural concept concerning the subject of this paper. Jenks (1993:11) quotes (Durkheim & Mauss, 1990) who refers to culture as part of human nature and summarises it in the following four categories:

1- Culture as an intellectual and rational ability setting out goals and aspiration in the human being which on individual basis reflects individual character.
2- Culture representing individual and group's 'intellectual and moral development in a society.'
3- Culture denotes social production including all intellectual and artistic aspects of a society.
4- Culture signifies social character - the way people organise and perceive their life.

These four general classifications of culture have further been discussed in more detail in different disciplines. In psychology, culture signifies a set of shared values placed within the psychological structure of a person providing a mental framework through which people observe the world and others. These shared values act as a medium relating a person to the cultural group allowing interaction and sharing common meanings and behaviour (Valsiner 2007; Kidd, 2002). Freud (1923) presents the same view, arguing that the superego[2] of our mind guides us to follow the cultural rules of the society we have been brought up. In this view, culture becomes 'an inherent, systemic organizer of the psychological systems of individual persons', that the change of environment will not stop its functioning (Boesch, 1991-inValsiner, 2007: 21). This means if a person or a group migrate from their home country to another country, their cultural norms and behaviour will not change.

Superego is one of the three interrelated elements forming the human mind. The other two according to Freud is id which is biological drives towards pleasure; and ego reflecting our personality and behaviour.

In Geography, culture is defined in terms of 'meaning-making and human imagining' (Mitchell, 2000: 13). These imagining and meanings are 'formed in discourse, language, symbols, signs and texts' (Lewis, 2002: 13). Culture then in its broadest sense refers to a set of qualities/order defining the social and productive aspect of society. On the social aspect, culture refers to the shared values, belief, habits and behaviour characterising the life of people (Mitchell, 2000). Each culture has developed its particular law and principles which regulate the social behaviour of the group (Hall, E. T. 1990). This represents the culture as the 'whole way of life' of a group of people, 'encompassing language, dress, food, habits, music, housing styles, religion, family structures and most importantly, values' (Mitchell, 2000: 13). In this 'whole way of life' definition, some cultural resources such as religion and its characteristic activities become the 'whole way of life' that makes life worth living (Elliot, T. S. 1962). Although the strength of religious belief has been moderated in some cultures, it remains strong in others. For example, for Muslim groups, religion is the 'whole way of life' that sets rules and regulation for social behaviour. To support this, Kazimee and Rahmani (2003) argue that history for the Muslim is not constructed by a series of the past events, but an interrelation between the advent of Islam and the birth and growth of the individual and its family and social attachments.

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They further quote Levi-Strauss who states: "In this culture [Muslim] there is no distinction between built form, culture, and religious philosophy, they belong together in a unison scheme.." (p.10). Nasser, (2000) refers to William Marcais, one of the French pioneer scholars on studying Islamic city and writes 'Islamic civilisation was not merely a set of religious beliefs and laws but also a functioning society which was Islamic in the sense that it organised the life of Muslims within a community, (p 15). Seufert (1997) demonstrates how religious criteria define social boundaries among the Muslim Kurdish migrants living in Istanbul and how overlooking these boundaries by members of the tribe isolate them from their closest relatives. '...marrying a Sunni Muslim instead of an Alevi is considered a serious offence. Those who desert the fiat and become Sunni Muslims, however, are described as 'those who are lost on the way to God. Such a person cannot remain part of the 5 clan; it is difficult for him to maintain contact even with his close relatives. In the same way, the institution of life-long fraternity exemplifies that it has not been linguistic but religious criteria that draw insurmountable social border for tribe-members.' (quoted in Öncü & Weyland, 1997, P.160)

This suggests that in some communities religion becomes a condition, not a choice. For these communities, religion forms a structural framework including all meanings and values that make life worth of living. On the productive aspect, culture refers to the cultural practices representing the intellectual, literary, artistic and creative production of a society in a historical period (Jenks.1993; Mitchell, 2000). Each culture has created a variety of materials, signs, and symbols which are part of their living environment, i.e. food, art, and architecture. These productions are an inherent part of their psychology and representation of their culture (Valsiner, 2007). The productive aspects of each culture are based on the individual sense of creativity stimulated by cultural values (Runco, 2014). In this view, the two social and productive aspects of the culture are interconnected in the way that social aspect as the process sets images and meaning for the products. For example, Islamic art is defined as a reflection of the Islamic religion which is related to Islamic spirituality. It is the notion of spirituality which urges the Muslim artist to produce artwork which portrays the notion of unity rooted in the philosophy of Islam (Blair and Bloom, 1995; Nasr, 1987; Godard, 1965).

Regarding the fixed and transient nature of culture, Valsiner (2007) emphasises on the stable nature of culture and writes 'Even if historical changes take place in a given society, culture is expected to be characterized by its stability' (P:22). Supporting the stable nature of culture, Hofstede (2010) refers to culture as a mental program which is sourced by 'the social environments in which one grew up and collected one's life experiences' (p4) which is very difficult to clean it up and make space for the different program. Lewis (2002) presents an opposite view, arguing that the imagining and meanings that construct culture are not fixed and are subject to change through time, place and human action since the assemblage of meaning was 'for a purpose within a particular historical and spatial context' (P:13).

In the era of globalisation, fast mobility and indeed under the influence of media, local cultures have been losing their characteristic by entering into the global culture. Welsch (1999) gives a comprehensive picture by stating that:

'Wherever we look, cultural life involves adaptations (often very recent ones) of materials from elsewhere: from music, clothing, and food to images and ideas. 'Local' cultures are everywhere made up, in part, from translocal elements; local culture incorporates 'transculturality' (quoted in Couldry, 2000: 95). Whether the process of globalisation would finally lead to cultural homogenization or not is a complex debate that requires assessing the stability and strength of the local culture. One positive view expresses that globalisation will not lead to homogenisation but sets a structure to portray and communicate our cultural differences in a more intelligible way. (Wilk, 1995, quoted in Couldry, 2000: 98)

The above review generally defined culture as the society's shared social construction, including the system of belief, social order, and social relation, to formulate common values. It portrayed religion for Muslim society is the way of life which sets out their perception of life, 'imagining and meaning', according to the exclusive nature of their belief which would not be influenced by global flows.

2.2 Cultural Identity:

The word identity appeared in the late 16th century meaning 'the quality or condition of being the same in substance, composition, nature, properties, or in particular qualities under consideration; absolute or essential sameness; oneness' (Benwell, 2007:18).

Theorists of identity recognise three models of identity: one-idem- as a distinct character which is the product of culture and stays the same over time and that our life experiences become meaningful if we structure them according to the traditional form. The other is –ipse- or self-identity and a personal discipline which keeps certain pledges despite changes in circumstances. The third one is Narrative Identity which is the place in between the other two, implying that life experience is worthy if it has a connection with certain cultural structure (Ricoeur, in Maan, 1999 PP: xv & xvi).

Kidds (2002) remarks if culture is the way of life representing the social behaviour of a group, the word identity, then, means the perception of the group about themselves and the others. Our identity, therefore, is established by placing ourselves within a cultural context to not only indicate who 'we are' but also 'where we are coming from' (Benhabib, 2000, in: Neill 2004: p.2).

Cultural identity is interpreted in two different ways; one is that it is formed by shared historical and cultural codes representing a group of people. These shared cultural features remain 'the same over time, even as the membership of persons in a culture change from generation to generation' (Valsiner 2007: 22). Knox (2010) argues that some social groups oppose integration with other social groups with different religions and ethnicity in order to preserve their group identity. In this way past plays a dominant role in the formation of identity as a fixed essence. The other view refers to the intervention of history in forming the identity, making it 'a matter of becoming as well as being'. In this view identity does not refer to 'who we are' or where we came from', but to 'what we might become' and represent ourselves. Identity, therefore, is not a complete product, but a process that evolves or constructed through the history and has 'traces of its past and what it is to become' (Hall & Du Gay, 1996: 4). Identity, therefore, should denote our representation at the time with reference to cultural tradition and renovation or invention rather than repetition.

Social identity is formed by the association of individuals with a group defining the group identity which individuals feel they belong to (Benwell and Stokoe, 2007: 18 &25). Identity for an ethnic group at the local level is what individuals relate themselves to a social group with similar cultural background and at international level, means individuals links to the country of origin-homeland (Honeyford, 1988).

Our individual identity is constructed through influence and practices of cultural resources that Couldry (2000), refers to as 'a vast range of things: from language, to how we hold and use our bodies, to ethical codes and imaginative horizons, right through, even, to the ways in which we imagine ourselves as distinct individuals - the social construction of 'the individual' (p 44). Identity, therefore, refers to our representation at the time in relation to cultural resources. Such a representation embraces all shared characteristics or particularity of objective, 'production', and subjective 'social practices' of a cultural group. The objective or visible factors include place, physical appearance, and artistic production which are fixed located at the forefront representing both individual and group identity, whereas, the practice of subjective factors such as social behaviour, belief, and the worldview may vary among the individual within a cultural group.

The subjective factors for the ethnic migrant groups, especially the older generation, whose historical background has been away from the land they live in stays always alive in their memory. The past is not a frozen picture, but a living memory which is only shared and understood by the members of the community. The regular practices of cultural assets such as language, religion and tradition among the ethnic groups continuously reconstruct the livelihood of the past (Moghaddam, 2002). While the older generation of ethnic groups within their exclusive society reconstruct the cultural behaviour of their country of origin, to demonstrate their identity – who they are - the younger generation who are born abroad are exposed to two cultural contexts of the exclusive ethnic background and an inclusive cultural environment they have been brought up and educated in[3]. This exposure to the two exclusive and inclusive cultural contexts creates a potential for individuals to develop an identity to include both. Whether such an identity could have the strength of cultural identity or not is debatable. Honeyford (1988) in his book 'integration or Disintegration' refers to this potential by expressing his school mission was to enabling 'the pupils to realise they were fully British'– and belong to the cultural environment that they are being brought up in - that such motion does not in a clash with their parents' conviction to maintain their Asian culture privately. Bhabha (1996) on the other hand, argues that exposure to two culture develops 'in-between' culture "baffling alike and different the parent culture." (In Hall & Du Gay, 1996: 54-60)

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[3] The role of media and soft technology may reduce the impact of ethnic background.

Over the past two decades, Religion has become the priority identity among the Muslims living in Europe. Whereas in most of the Muslim countries, religion is considered as national identity, for most Muslims living abroad, it is a personal identity which distinguishes them from others (Poole, in Alcoff & Mendieta, 2003: 27).

2.3 Space and place:

Michel Foucault provides a broad definition of space; 'The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space [.....] we live inside a set of relations' (Kham, 2000).Tuna views space more in relation to human being and define it 'as the embodiment of feelings, images and thoughts of those who live, work or otherwise deal with that space' (Tuan, 1977, in:Jiven& Larkham, 2003: 10). I further define the above definition of 'space' in the context of this paper as the three-dimensional setting within or between places for social behaviour of people. In short, I am referring to the social space in which we live and create relationship with other people, societies, and surroundings.

While in most of the literature space has an abstract and subjective definition, the place has been interpreted in a more comprehensible and objective way. Castello refers to the place as a 'qualified space' and that changes the subjective or abstract notion of space to a more objective notion of place that could be experienced (Castello, 2010,in: Wesener, 2013 P. 80). Places are parts of 'human environments where meanings, activities and a specific landscape are all implicated and enfolded by each other'(Relph, 1992, in: Hague & Jenkins: 4). Places are distinguished spaces by their pervaded stories, meaning, and sentiments, (Rose, 1995, in: Hague & Jenkins:4 & 5). In phenomenology, the place is defined as "any environmental locus in and through which individual or group actions, experiences, intentions, and meanings are drawn together spatially" (Casey, 2009, in: Seamon, 2013: 1).

In theoretical discussions three types of place have been identified: the first one is the material or physical dimension of place what Castello refers to as 'place of aura', including the physical characteristic of the place, its landscape, public spaces, and materials. The second type is 'place of memory' referring to time and space. And the third type is 'place of polarity' referring to the social dimension of the place including social interaction forming social structure (Castello 2010, in: Wesener, 2013:79).

Place, therefore, has some association with our life either as a memory of our direct experience of being there, or indirect experience developed through words, stories, and images. I know the place where I was brought up, I have heard about the central park in New York, I have seen images of that place on TV. Proshansky et al., (1983) argues that even our ongoing experience of a physical setting moves 'to the stage of being remembered' (P77). Our memory of the place is therefore constructed through both our direct experience of the place being there and seeing its physical appearance and indirect experience through narratives and images of the place. The memories of direct experience generally give meaning to a place since they refer to our social life that has been taking place there. In this sense, space and place become the integrated part of each other as body and soul, where the body represents the physical appearance and the soul its social space.

Henri Lefebvre in his book the production of space (1974) establishes a relationship between space and social relations arguing that space is both shaped and produced by social relations. His point of argument that has opened a new vision on the notion of spatiality recognises the role of social relations in shaping the space which means space in any culture is a stage setting arranged to host the social performance. In this view, as was discussed earlier, space becomes part of cultural products stimulated by the cultural process.

Setha Low (2014) proposes the concept of 'spatializing culture' to discuss the relationship between culture, space, and place. She demonstrates the multifaceted relationship between people and place including aspects of social and historical dimension which might have originated in other places. I take the term 'spatializing culture' used by Setha Low especially the reference to its historical origin to demonstrate how different cultural groups organise their urban spaces to suit their cultural preferences and these spaces become places representing their cultural identity.

2.4 Place identity in the context of culture:

City identity is generally formed by its cultural history represented through its heritage, its traditional character, and urban qualities, demonstrating the unique characteristic of its urban form. This unique characteristic represents the artistic ability of its citizens throughout the history forming the cultural memory of its present citizen.

If we take the definition of place discussed earlier as a physical setting embodying space and having a particular location, we then can draw a parallel argument that the place identity is formed by a combination of spatial, social, cultural and historical characteristics of its inhabitants that distinguishes them from the others (Amundsen 2001, in: Hague & Jenkins: 13; Tilley, 2006). To address how 'meaning is attached to the spatiality of social life', Jensen & Richardson (2004) quote Shields (1991) who expresses ' By means of a process of 'social specialisation' social agents give meaning to spaces through socio-spatial practices and identification of processes' (In Bærenholdt, and Simonsen 2004: 87). Proshansky et al. (1983) further elucidate that the relationship of people to place involves both its physical and 'social meanings and belief attached to it 'by its residents (P177). This relationship sets out a foundation for place-identity which in the context of culture relates to self-identity and includes a variety of images and memories of the past and present (Watson 2007).

In phenomenology place identity is related to the place that people associate themselves with it which represents their group identity (Seamon, 2013). For example, most of the Muslim people, notably the elderly, usually refer to the Muslim neighbourhoods in another city rather than the name of the city. For them the place of cultural familiarity is the inside world that they belong to and can make sense of it, the city is only a location outside of their world.

The place-identity of an ethnic group in a multicultural society, therefore, represents 'not only, different uses and experiences with space and place, but corresponding variations in the social values, meanings, and ideas which underlie the use of those spaces.' (Proshanskyetal.1983: P78). Each place, therefore, embodies a set of meanings expressing its particularity in relation to the practice of socio-cultural norms and behaviour of each group defining its identity.

3. The Case Study

3.1 Context and Method:

The four subjects of culture, identity, space and place discussed in this paper will be examined broadly in the context of cultural minority neighbourhoods in Birmingham with more attention to the Muslim areas since they are the largest ethnic groups with rich cultural and religious background.

Birmingham is a culturally diverse City. According to the 2011 Population Census, 53.1% of residents were white British, and 46.9% described themselves from other ethnic groups including 26.62% Asian British, 8.98% black British, 4.44 % mixed and 2.03% other ethnic groups. The term 'ethnic' in social science refers to 'a group sharing a common culture and defined largely by descent and perhaps physical similarity' having similar language, religion, social customs, cultural artefacts and characteristic ways of doing things (Honeyford, 1988: 5).

The largest ethnic groups in Birmingham are Pakistani 13.5%, Indian 6%, Caribbean 4.44% and Bangladeshi 3.03%. The major religions were 46.1% Christian, 21.8% Muslim, 3.02 Sikh, 2.08 Hindu and 19.3% of residents declared no religion (www.birmingham.gov.uk). These varieties of cultural groups have transformed the urban landscape of the city to multiple neighbourhoods each representing different cultural practices. In other words, one can map the urban landscape of the city based on cultural and ethnic groupings representing socio-spatial differences in the city (Tonkiss, 2005). The Birmingham cultural map is also an example of Tonkiss statement that 'Culture leaves a kind of 'stain' on the urban landscape, marking out different neighborhoods in ways which go beyond their economic functions or physical conditions.'(Tonkiss, 2005: 40)

Such a map shows that almost 70% of these minority ethnic groups are living in neighborhoods within 12 districts close to the city centre. The location of these ethnic clusters close to the city centre has historically been due to the availability of job around the city centre for early migrants with no skills and educational qualifications (Knox & Pinch 2010). Cultural background together with low-income level has been continuous forces fostering the formation of cultural/ethnic clusters maximizing group social interaction.
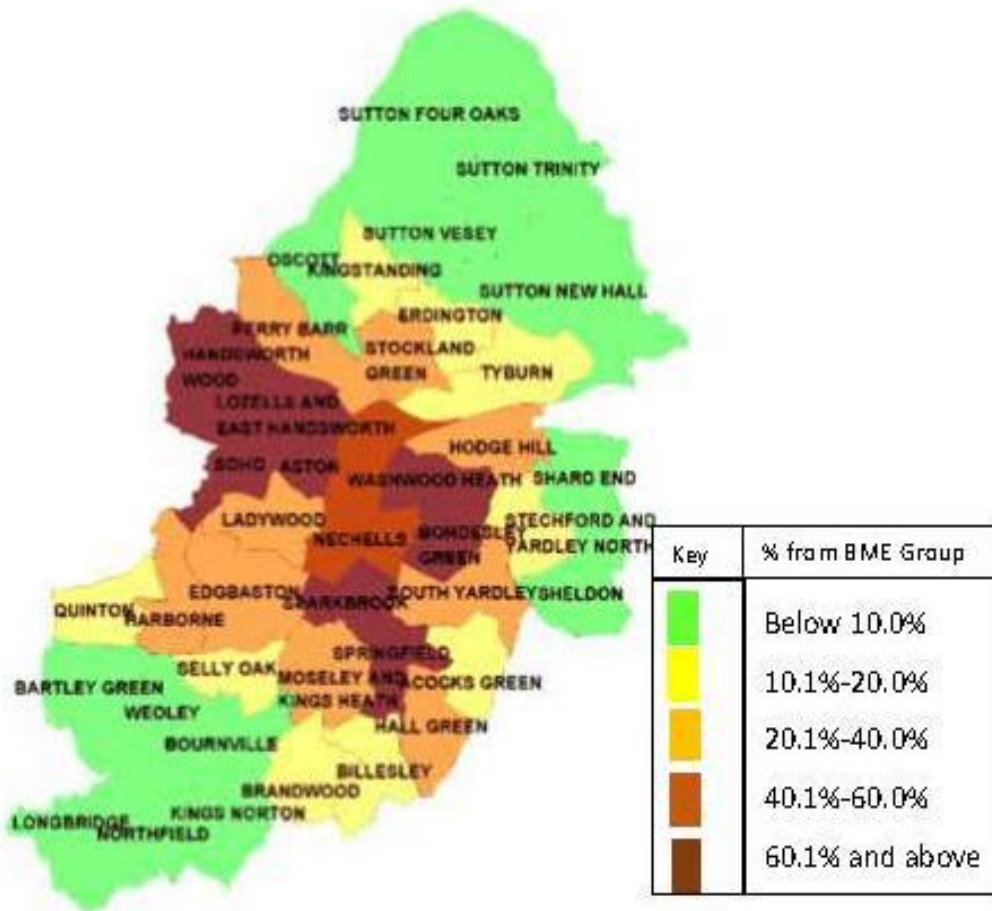
Fig. 1: Black and minority ethnic groups by ward in Birmingham in May 2010.

Source: Birmingham City Council

One condition that supports and strengthens the formation of an ethnic community is the feeling of not belonging to the environment they live in. The story of their life is constructed as belonging to somewhere else. Ethnic group's attachment to their place, as was discussed above, depends on their memory of the place, and how it represents their cultural identity. The other condition is that the close relationship of the individual to their ethnic society and reference to their cultural and historical background has not been affected by the notion of individualisation as George Simmel (1948) discusses concerning of the western society. For most of the young generation among the ethnic groups, especially those with strong cultural and religious background individual freedom does not mean breaking off from their socio-cultural and historical background, but to achieve a level of progress within the social environment they live to represent their community. (in Bridge & Watson, 2005)

These factors strengthen social ties among the ethnic community, facilitate their social behaviour and contribute to shaping their place. What identifies ethnic neighbourhoods are not physical boundaries but spatial boundaries formed by socio-cultural practices that according to Tonkiss (2005) 'gives objective form to a subjective understanding of space..' (p.32). Boundaries of ethnic neighbourhoods are, therefore, defined by the socio- spatial quality of these places including social behaviour, interaction, and use of spaces creating soft barrier defining ethnic identity. The case study aimed to collect data on the socio-spatial character of the place in relation to the topics discussed in the paper. Its focus was on Muslim neighbourhoods because of a: as was discussed in the cultural section they have a stronger cultural community, and b: they have less historical and religious relationship with the British culture than the other two Indian and Caribbean major ethnic groups.

Although the first stage of the case study included interviews, the results showed that interviewees' responses were affected by the current socio-political environment concerning the Muslim community. The case study, therefore, concentrated on observing people's behaviour, listening to their conversation, taking notes and pictorial record. I also managed to have few casual conversations with the shop staff especially in the food shops regarding some of the social behaviours that were not clear to me.[4]

3.2 Analysis of the outcomes:

Looking at the social interaction of ethnic groups in the public places reveals the specific characteristic of the cultural behaviour of each group with reference to their traditional/historical background. For example, the Social behaviour within the neighbourhood of Muslim ethnic groups in Birmingham is similar to what Kazemi and Rahmani discuss regarding the social principles and behaviour of the Muslim society. They write that street in the traditional Muslim cities is a 'space of wandering and happenstance, it is a space to engage with other members of communities without prior arrangement' (Kazimee & Rahmani, 2003:106). During my visit in 2015 to Amman city, Jordan, I observed the same behaviour in the streets around the central mosque in the old part of the city. In these streets, people were wandering around and interacting as they knew each other. Lapidus (1973) raises the same point by referring to the socio-spatial character of the market in traditional Islamic towns, as the place of mixed urban activities bringing people together and allowing easy movement from one activity to other.

The main street within the Muslim neighbourhoods represents the same character. The multifunctional environment of pedestrian routes- walking, shopping, display of goods and clothes- fosters the social interaction of the group contributing to the livelihood of the place.
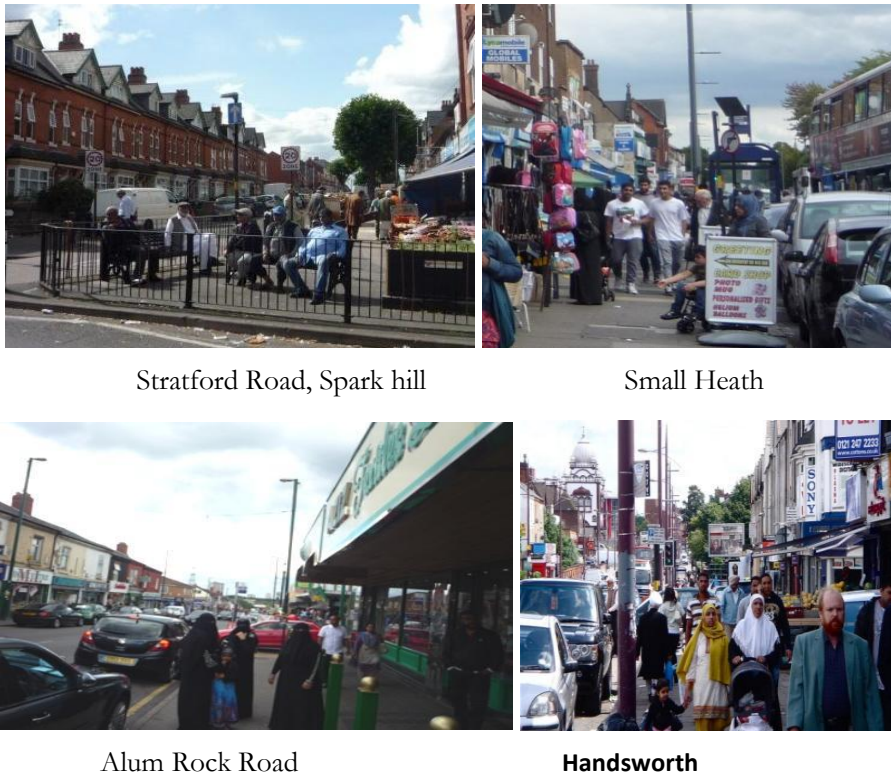

Stratford Road, Spark hill   Small Heath

Alum Rock Road   **Handsworth**
Fig. 2: Social character of the main streets in the Muslim neighbourhoods in Birmingham

What one generally observes in the minority neighbourhoods is the cultural transformation of the place to form a suitable space for their cultural behaviour. I use the term cultural transformation because these places were not initially produced by their current users but have been altered to suit their cultural behaviour - organising physical space to suit cultural practice.

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[4] One interesting casual discussion was about an elderly lady followed by five beautifully dressed young girls going up and down the high street of one of the mixed ethnic neighbourhood. I was told that the lady is a marriage agent who is trying to find husbands for girls.

The process of transformation of an existing physical place by an ethnic community into a social space suitable for their social practices includes signs and symbols referring to the groups' culture and religion, as well as the way that space is utilised. Here one observes the cultural language and text in shaping the spatial character of the street (Barthes 1977, in: Tonkiss 2005). Signs and symbols are represented through writing, the use of language and visual display of traditional and religious motives representing the unique character of the place.

The utilisation of space is the most noticeable factor since Pedestrian spaces are used for multiple activities in addition to walking.
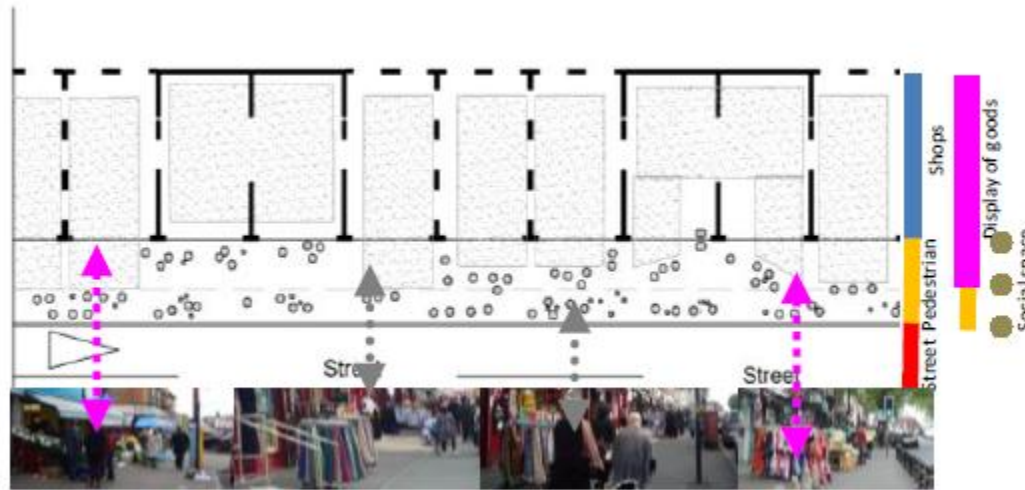

Diagram 1: based on mapping the observation in the main street of four Muslim neighbourhoods displaying the socio-spatial character of the place.

Here the expansion of shops businesses into the sidewalks has contributed to the livelihood of the street. This very open and spread/disordered functional organisation of space defines its differences with other places in the city representing its unique cultural character.

Alum Rock Road   Coventry Road, Small Heath

Stratford Road, Spark hill   Ladypool Road, Sparkbrook

Fig. 3: Utilisation of space in Muslim neighbourhoods in Birmingham

The business expansion of shops selling daily needs of people, and displaying clothes and household furniture has changed the character of the street into a long linear exhibition place flanked by items of the daily needs and interests of people. Despite its chaotic spatial appearance, one can notice how the pattern of peoples' behaviour nicely fits within this disorder demonstrating a unique socio-spatial pattern.

The main market streets in these neighbourhoods are social and leisure places for ethnic people wondering as well as places for cultural events and practices. Here, as Hillier and Hanson (2005) explain, we see the spatial character of the street as a theatre of the everyday life of the people where the ordering of space represents its unique cultural dimension. All signs, sounds, smell, and behaviour represent their cultural identity through reference to their homeland. These ethnic neighbourhood streets demonstrate the embodiment of cultural and social practices in space representing the social life of space. The identity of neighbourhoods of ethnic groups with rich historical and cultural background is further represented by their religious buildings. Mosques in the Muslim and Temples in the Indian neighbourhoods introduce the socio-cultural of the area to the visitors.
Central Mosque, Lozells

Central mosque, Highgate   Central Mosque, Lozells   Hindu temple, Handsworth

Fig. 4: Religious buildings in the cultural minority neighbourhoods in Birmingham

These buildings are places for religious ritual and festivals events that bind members of each group together, preserving their traditional cultural and religious norms representing their ethnic identity.
The case study demonstrated the distinctive character of public spaces within the Muslim ethnic groups in Birmingham. It showed unique character of these places have been formed by the integration of the groups historical and socio-cultural norms to the present. And it is this reference to the cultural history which conveys meaning and sense of familiarity revealing their cultural identity.

4. Conclusion

As was mentioned earlier, many large cities in Europe have become multicultural societies including gropes with different racial and ethnic background. Points highlighted in this paper - ethnic grouping, cultural norms, identity, and social space- are shared by all ethnic groups and apply to all multicultural cities. One noticeable impact of transformation from a single to the multicultural society, as we have seen in the case of Birmingham, is the formation of different ethnic neighbourhoods with specific social and physical characteristics. The clustering of ethnic groups with a similar cultural background, country of origin and religion, has enabled them to form a close community for practicing their cultural norms. The formation of the closed community has also provided the opportunity for ethnic groups to re-organise the existing urban places to social spaces suitable for practicing their cultural norms. The case study demonstrated the spatial character of cultural differences in the city. This culturalisation of the space with reference to a combination of the social, spatial, and cultural background of the group distinguishes the unique character of the place establishing its identity. Consequently, although these neighbourhoods are parts of the Birmingham city, their unique socio-spatial characteristics, indicate their differences with the rest of the city. And these differences constrain cross-cultural interaction leading in some cases to marginalisation and social exclusion affecting the social structure of the city.

An important point to address here is: how to achieve social cohesion in a multicultural city? I have chosen the term 'social cohesion' which is formed through the recognition of cultural norms of different ethnic groups within the city promoting social cooperation and bounding a society together. This is different from the political terms of 'assimilation' and 'integration'.

The former one is an extremist view indicating cultural minorities to abandon their cultural norms and the latter, 'integration', is a long-term goal to achieve since, as was discussed in the cultural section, culture for some groups stays the same over time. The simple answer to the above question is by recognition of socio-cultural differences and formation of a shared identity creating a sense of belonging for all the inhabitants.

Approaches to address the above question have so far been through economic development since most residents of the ethnic neighbourhoods are among the lower income people. It is assumed that economic development at regional and city level would create jobs, improve the income level and consequently remove social boundaries. However, the economic-based approaches have so far had little impact in promoting a cohesive urban society, since those low percentages who manage to increase their income level and move out of neighbourhood will stay socially attached to it. It is important to recognise that a sustainable city includes three factors of social, economic, and environmental sustainability. However, in the current global environment, more action is taken to address the economic factor, and more promises are made to address the other two, social and environmental factors.

For promoting a cohesive society, we have to remove the existing barriers that separate clusters within the city. This could be addressed through a: recognition, not rejection, of prevailing social and cultural difference within the urban society; and b: reconsidering approaches to the city planning, urban development, and regeneration schemes to provide a suitable environment for different cultural groups to create a sense of belonging for all. Approaches in urban design and regeneration have generally been based on precedent studies, evidence-based approach, concerning economic evaluation, urban movement and the housing needs of the community. Consideration for human behaviour in the built environment has been based on various design guidance forming a set of toolkits to 'determine [..] urban regeneration programmes'. (Evans, in: Aboutorabi & Wesener, 2010: 25)

Although these toolkits indicate community involvement to ensure the outcomes of the project respond to the community needs and the quality of public spaces, in practice community participation is usually overlooked. To address this, Coote, (2004) proposes knowledge-based approach " to building knowledge over time, drawing together local experience, research findings and, critically, a better understanding of trade-offs and political imperatives." (in Evans, 2010). Considering the complex social landscape of multicultural cities, the paper proposes the integration of the two evidence and knowledge-based approaches with full recognition of the community participation for promoting social cohesion. Such integration would form a triangulation concept takes into account appraisal of other experiences, official dada, toolkits etc., and establish a close relationship between culture and space ensuring the end product, spaces and places, becomes locations of interaction that suits different cultural communities encouraging social inclusion.

Diagram 2: Triangulation approach

This has been indicated in Highbury 3 " The city when it is functioning successfully- is a place of interaction; a place where the economic, the social and the cultural interact to create new opportunities and resources for its people.." (Birmingham City Council) Such an approach enables us to recognise that globalisation not only had an impact on the economic environment of the city but also on its social environment.

This indicates not focussing solely on economic development, building commercial and high rise office blocks in the city centre, but also paying attention to the social landscape of the city. We have to recognise that the change of the social landscape of the city from a single to the multiple social environments requires a more complex approach to the city. In the academic environment, this has been addressed by changing the focus of the scholarly discourses from the physical and functional aspects of the city to include the social and environmental issues. Addressing this complex issue in practice requires a better understanding of the critical role of the urban environment in softening the notion of inclusiveness among ethnic groups promoting the development of a new shared identity for the younger generation. Such an understanding enables us to recognise that our planning and design approaches require certain flexibilities and modification in the context of different social groups. This calls for the inclusion of variable standards in the planning and design regulations.

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