

Explaining New towns In terms of Meaning of Place Using Semiotics

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Abstract

Considering the city as the body of social life and the basis of human growth, new towns are samples of unsuccessful places to live. In comparison with old cities, one of the problems of new towns is the matter of meaning of place in their user's eye.

A New Town is mostly the physical body of a city which people can't find its meaning and even can't attach new compatible meaning to. This shows that meaning had been ignored in the design process, so new towns must be reviewed basically in the theoretical frame to make a better understanding of people and meaning which must be taken into account in the design process. The main question of this article is that why new towns are different from the old cities in the people's eyes in the case of meaning of place?

Semiotics is as an approach to meaning, which firstly focuses on how meaning has been shaped and how it has been conveyed in language. Elements, which semiotics takes to describe the process of meaning are used in other disciplines as well.

This is a theoretical research and is a kind of descriptive and analytical one. Collecting the information based on written materials then the content analysis leads this research to main data which show how semiotics explains the meaning. Generalizing the ideas of semiotics to place and analysis shows the three main phases which place makers should concern in order to provide the basis of meaningfulness of New towns.

Keywords: New towns, Meaning, Semiotics, Structure, Text, Signification.

Introduction

New towns were major programs of postwar city planning. Although the program come to an end by late 1960, but still there are countries which are making New towns to confront with over population of large cities.

The main group of New towns is shaped mainly based on postwar needs, but it is also a small group of these cities shaped based on modernism manifesto and designed by famous architects of the modern generation. Brasilia, Chandigarh and Islamabad are from the second group.

Looking at the Urbanism history, there is a large gap between old organic cities which grow in time and these pre-planned Towns which developed by experts and had been done in a limited period of time. The main difference between, is in the quality of habitant's life in these two types of living spaces.

One of the most major absent qualities is meaning. Cities which shaped by time seem to be more meaningful in people's eye than New towns.

This article is about to explain why meaning quality is absent in New towns. In order to do this, Semiotics has been chosen as a theory of meaning.

Methodology

This Article is a desk-based Qualitative research and has been done in 3 parts. The First part is about to explain the Semiotics, second one is using elements of Semiotics to understand New towns and the third part is focused on analysis and findings.

on data collection phase, the most basic books and written material have been chosen and analyzed. Using Content analysis on basic written data, leads to find three main categories in Semiotics, which have a role in meaning.

In the analysis part based on logical reasoning, the subject of New towns has been examined with three categories of meaning makers found in the first step.

The analysis shows the gaps and missing points on meaning in New towns which can help improving this quality in near future.

Meaning

This article is mainly focused on the term meaning. There are different point of views on studying meaning, All are trying to explain how meaning is shaped and how is conveyed. Semiotics as one of these approaches shows that meaning is completely depends on the recipient and his own mind and mindset.

Semiotics

Semiotics is the study of signs, sign processes and so the study of meaning-making. It is closely related to the field of linguistics and language and absolutely to Ferdinand de Saussure a Swiss linguist and semiotician whose ideas laid a foundation for many Semiotics in the 20th century .he is one of two major fathers of Semiotics. The other major father of Semiotics is Charles Sanders Peirce, who was an American philosopher, logician, mathematician, and scientist (Sojoudi, 2008, p. 7).

Sign

Semiotics is basically shaped on its main element which is the sign. Every sign consists of two parts which are closely related and can't be used separately. These two parts are signifier (that represent something else) and signified (which the sign stands for and refers to). (Chandler, 2001, p. 42).

Anything can be a sign as long as someone interprets it as 'Signifying' something, referring to or standing for something Other than itself (Chandler, 2001, p. 16). As pierce said, "Nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign" (Pierce, 1931-1957, p. 172).

In Semiotics, the whole meaning is based on signs and exchanging them. A sign needs one sender and one recipient to be exchanged and conveyed. The Sender is someone who is sending a message using a sign and the recipient is someone who understands a sign and tries to find its meaning. (Guiraud, 2001, p. 19) .



A sign: Association of signifier and signified (Saussure-1974)

Encoding, Decoding and Signification

There is a process in Semiotics, which in sender is sending a message to the recipient by using a sign. This process is called encoding. The other main Process in which the recipient finds the meaning of the sign is decoding.

Encoding is making a sign (a relation between signifier and signified) and it is not an optional or author-based connection. The best guide to encode is Studying The process of decoding. Semiotics states some principles to encode which are based on the studies on decoding.

Semiotics introduces the relation between signifier and signified as a 'signification'. And this is a kind of unbreakable, social based connection, which encoded by the sender and decoded by the receiver of the sign. So Each Sign in order to convey its message and so to be meaningful needs to be able to decode and sender can't create and invent signs which people can't decode. Umberto Eco an Italian semiotician in his book "a Theory of Semiotics" said that a sign is used based on cultural meanings and can't be separated from its background.

Text

Meaning of signs is not only driven by their signification relation. A part of the meaning comes from the other signs which are in relation with this specific sign. The meaning of each sign is related to both physical and meaningful relations of it with other signs. This relates each sign and its meaning to the pattern called Text.

Semiotics is often employed in the analysis of texts (although it is far more than just a mode of textual analysis). Here it should perhaps be noted that a 'Text' can exist in any medium and could be verbal, non-verbal, or both. (Chandler, 2001, p. 9)

The term Text, usually refers to a message which has been recorded in some way so that it is physically independent of its sender or receiver. A text is an assemblage of signs (such as words, images, sounds and/or gestures) constructed and interpreted with a particular medium of communication. (Kamrani, 2009, p. 49)

Structure

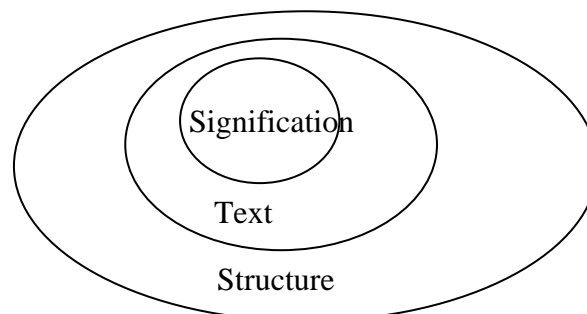
The other phase of meaningfulness, after signification and the text is to have meaning in Structures. The Structure mainly refers to Structuralism ideology which is the theory that says elements of human culture must be understood in terms of their relationship to a larger, extensive system or structure. (Ahmadi, 2009, p. 14)

The Structure is defined by itself and nothing outside of it. (Sojudi, 2008, p. 115) In fact, Structures make all meanings possible. For instance, all romantic books gain their meanings from the romantic structure of literature.

Semiotics points in meaning

Each sign in order to be meaningful must have meaning in 3 phases:

- Signification: A relation between signifier and signified that is a social based relation and can't be changed by decision of the designer.
- Text: A Relation between all signs in a context, which affects others meaning.
- Structure: a large system which has all possible meaning inside.



Meaning phases in Semiotics

New towns and Semiotics

New towns

The most New towns specifications which are important for analysis it as a sign system is mentioned below:

- Having pre-set goals.
- Establishing in limited time and space and by specific decision makers.
- Mostly planned based on amount of the population, not their social, individual needs and specifications. Place as a sign system

Over 1960 Semiotics studies started in Architecture and Urbanism. One of the first books is “meaning in Architecture” by Jencks and Baird. But it is Roland Barthes whom talked about the urban and Semiotics specifically.

“The city is a discourse, and this discourse is actually a language. The city speaks to its inhabitants; we speak our city, simply by inhabiting it, by traversing it, by looking at it.” (Barthes, 1997, p. 163)

Sender and recipient in the city

Since there are lots of different connection and communication in the city, there must be lots of different types of signs, so senders and recipients. (Kamrani, 2009, p. 78)

In this article, senders are limited to experts, designers and planners whom make decisions about the city and people are the recipient of their messages.

In the other mode, experts try to understand how people are using the place and how they feel about it, so experts will go after the signs people left in the place and in this case people are senders and experts are recipients.

Structure in place

Each sign inherits a part of its meaning from the structure, so it's obligatory to consider the structures when encoding signs in place. The Structure is larger than place (as a sign system) and has all possible meanings in itself.

Structures in place are those bases that can't be omitted from the city. The Meaning of each sign relates to all structures of the city such as Cultural, political, physical, historical and social structures.

New town as a text

With Semiotics there can be a different definition of New towns. New towns are Texts in Semiotics approach which are Written by place makers in limited time and specific land. Text is where all signs come together physically and each sign inherits a part of its meaning from other signs around and so from the text. The whole city and all physical elements of it, is a text.

Discussion: the matter of meaning in New towns

In older cities, there was always a process of physical growth, which people can take a role in. People are adding their own values and signs to the environment so can understand and perceive the place better. Considering this point One of the main meaning problems of New towns is because of their sudden construction, making a whole town with a start and end date. People are confronted with a full text, which there is no space to add their own elements and signs so People become just users here and must understand pre-shaped signs.

The question to be answered here is that which elements and layers of design and planning can be added to the New towns design and planning process which can improve their identification and meaning quality.

The very first point is all urban experts must understand, their whole physical product as a town is a sign system which conveys messages to people. And all small and big parts can play a role

in people's mind. So in order to encode correctly, they need to know about decode process and people's mindset.

Making a Signification

Each sign that has been shaped and been used during time, has its own signification relation that is not based on taste and can't be broken easily. It has hidden social protection. Considering this point, urban experts can't invent or create their own signs and expect people to understand their meanings.

The signification relation is not an inventory. Although it can be changed during the time, but even this change is a social based change and can't be driven by outer forces and urban experts.

Semiotics emphasis is on social meanings, since unfriendly signs, even ideal ones don't necessarily have meaning for people. Standards or ideological qualities which have not meaning for people can make a beautiful design, unsuccessful. Chandigarh and Brasilia are two good samples of this case.

It is important to keep in mind that both signified and signifier are elements of unique unit and are inseparable. So in case of losing one of them in everyday life, the other is not working as a sign. For example, if a social content of a sign is ignored or eliminate from everyday life, the figure which refers to, is becoming meaningless too.

Considering Structures

One of the basic elements of meaning in Semiotics is structure. In place sign system, there are lots of structures. Culture, climate, history, economics and other structures must be considered in the design and planning New towns. Considering the structure as a part of meaning shows why in different places the meaning of a specific sign differs for people.

Making a Text

Texts are the ground basis for signs to appear. Semiotics has some principles for each sign to place beside the other signs in the text. So text is not a group of signs, placing beside each other, text is a relation between signs that has meaning impression on each other.

Planning and constructing New towns in a short period of time, can take the text quality out of it. Placing parts of towns and regulate them just physically and not considering their role in other part's meaning can make New Towns meaningless.

It is necessary to design and plan New towns as a whole to make it like a text and not separated units which have just physical relations.

Considering the Recipient

Although Modernism manifesto takes human beings as biological species which have same needs all around the world, Now it is clear that beside biological needs, human beings are in need of identification and distinction from others. In proportion and relation to where physically and mentally they live, their mindsets shapes and are distinct from the others.

From Semiotics lessons, It is clear that Considering the recipient and his mindset is necessary, when urban experts are planning the town. On the other hand it is necessary to understand and locate opportunities which can give people chance of adding their own signs and meaning to place which can show their identification much better than those experts.

Conclusion

Semiotics as an approach to meaning can give advices to placemakers in order to bring the quality of conveying messages (understanding meaning) to people in place , so in New towns. On the other hand New towns today, which are unsuccessful places in meaning quality, needs more fundamental studying on theoretical frameworks. So using Semiotics on New towns concept, could help making better places to live.

Semiotics shows that correct encoding by placemakers will lead to correct decoding by people and that will decrease the gap between the two and people can understand the meaning of placemakers much better than before.

The first important outcome of this research is Considering people and social based relations in the society which set people's mind to understand their environments and its signs, in a specific way. This is what Semiotics calls as the matter of correct signification. Making and using signs based on what people were using and understanding before. Not inventing new signs which the social mindsets don't support.

The second is to care about what was in context before constructing the new place. Taking place as a text which has a whole of physics and meaningful body to add new signs is important. And this the text role in Semiotics.

The third basic principle is to consider the structures of the society, because all signs have their own meaning in structures. All economical, political, social, environmental and other structures have their own meaning effect on signs. It is important to notify that although Structures are the largest whole which contains meaning, but can be different from place to place or time to time. They are large, but not worldwide necessarily.

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