SPATIAL CHARACTER CONVEYED THROUGH STREET FURNITURE

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ABSTRACT

Spatial character is an intangible, but significant part of our cultural heritage. The amalgamation of objects, buildings and landscapes, their use and reshaping over the centuries, and unique appearance at specific points in time endow places spatial identity and uniqueness. This paper focuses on vernacular, everyday objects and street furniture. They are often overlooked in our urban spaces and rarely considered of relevance in the debate on cultural heritage. Whilst being increasingly generic and globalised in their design, they also express local character and act as carriers of cultural and spatial identity. Seeing a silhouetted group of such elements might achieve instant recognition of the cities they belong to, such as London and Paris, but also for less renowned cities, such as Ljubljana, Granada and Szczecin. This paper seeks to identify everyday street artefacts, explain their role in spatial character building and, through examples, expose three instances of recognisability where such objects can be considered as carriers of spatial identity.

Keywords: spatial character, spatial identity, cultural heritage, street furniture, street objects, sign, icon, signifier, signified

CARATTERE SPAZIALE TRASMESSO DALL'ARREDO URBANO

SINTESI

Il carattere spaziale è una parte immateriale ma importante del nostro patrimonio culturale. L'amalgama di oggetti, edifici, paesaggi, il loro uso e la loro trasformazione nel corso dei secoli e il loro unico mostrarsi in dati punti nel tempo, creano identità ambientale e unicità dei luoghi. Questo argomento si concentra su edifici a noi familiari e di uso quotidiano e sull'arredo urbano. Questi sono spesso trascurati nelle nostre aree urbane e raramente sembrano considerati importanti nella discussione sul patrimonio culturale. Nonostante come aspetto siano sempre più generici e globalizzati, esprimono anche un carattere locale e fungono da portatori di identità culturale e territoriale. Uno sguardo su un gruppo di sagome di tali elementi può stimolare un immediato riconoscimento della città cui appartengono, ad esempio Londra e Parigi, così come di città meno note come Lubiana, Granada o Stettino. Questo documento tenta di identificare i manufatti di strada di tutti i giorni, di spiegare il loro ruolo nella costruzione del carattere territoriale e mostrare tre esempi di riconoscibilità in cui tali edifici possono essere visti come portatori di identità territoriale.

Parole chiave: carattere spaziale, identità spaziale, patrimonio culturale, arredamento urbano, edifici, segno, icona, marcatore, marcato

INTRODUCTION

Spatial identity acts as an important constituent of cultural identity in that it provides continuity, sustainability, character and inertia to societies and cultural landscapes, and is a fragile and fuzzy part of the broader concept of cultural heritage. The amalgamation of objects, buildings and landscapes, through their use and their reshaping in history, are the ingredients from which unique appearances at specific points in time came to be. Rautenberg (1998) established two categories by which built artefacts can achieve cultural heritage status: 'heritage by designation' and 'heritage by appropriation'. The latter is of particular interest to this paper as we focus on vernacular, everyday objects, such as waste bins, benches, signage, bus stops, and the like, those things usually summed up under the established terms of urban- or-street-furniture. They often go overlooked in our urban spaces and are rarely considered of relevance in the debate on cultural identity, cultural heritage and other elevated notions.

SPATIAL CHARACTER AND URBAN ELEMENTS

The above-mentioned notion of spatial character and its connection to urban street objects needs to be clarified before delving into spatial identity related characteristics of street elements. Spatial character (Juvančič and Verovšek, 2017; Verovšek et al., 2015) is used instead of the more established concept of spatial identity, which itself can be, at times, counterproductive, being closely interwoven with the notion of built cultural heritage, listed and restricted, and suggestive in relation to approaches and attitudes towards it. Tweed and Sutherland (2007) detected a similar issue when trying to define built cultural heritage. We prefer a looser, less rigid and more collective interpretation of identity that accepts a less-purist, more tolerant view of urban elements that are not necessarily listed and protected by law, including elements traditionally omitted from the heritage debate, even though they significantly contribute to specific *urban images*. Thus, the character of a cultural landscape or built environment, be it spatial or urban, is a much more appropriate and less intimidating term.

The combination of architectural landscape as defined by Fister et al. (1993) and broader cultural and spatial identity definitions is relevant for extracting regional, collective and general, rather than particular, town-specific identifiers, such as individual monuments, significant buildings, and the like.

Visitors and inhabitants alike perceive urban environments experientially, through motion, in sequence, from personal points of view and within limits set by their receptive apparatus (Cullen, 1971). Whilst squares, harbours, monuments, fountains, churches and other specific buildings remain strong carriers

of particular-place identity, anonymous public spaces convey common, wider, less specific, but also, for the purposes of this paper, more relevant, local spatial identities; these are also the places where we find and observe the mundane street objects which also contribute to spatial character.

EVERYDAY STREET OBJECTS: COMMON VS PARTICULAR

Recurring, common and generic urban elements as repetitive and common bearing points sharing the same meaning across different places and settings bring ever present, constant and reliable points of reference; through them, we gain an incredible amount of information on possible space utilisation and services provided, even local attitudes towards public spaces. The generic, but common design characteristics benefit users in terms of instant function recognition and known-object reassurance in potentially unknown urban environments.

Juvančič and Verovšek (2018) have shown that such objects can be, in combination with other depictions, meaningful carriers of urban messages and 'urban readability'; they can be used in the research and analysis on urban space, and in relation to visual narratives on space issues and use for educational, informative and public participation purposes.

The variety, scarcity, abundance and even surplus of such elements in our urban environments might indicate settlement development level, space centrality, local authority attitude towards open public spaces, and more. With many of them delimiting the space and being placed in public spaces that are used by a variety of users, we should not forget on vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities and elderly (Kerbler, 2015), for whom they sometimes act as obstructions. Although these are all most interesting research topics they are, however, not in this paper's purview.

Whilst the aforementioned objects are becoming increasingly generic and globalised in design, they do, occasionally, express local character and act as carriers of cultural and spatial identity; moreover, they have evolved and represent unlisted, yet quite tangible heritage. Seeing a silhouetted group of such elements might achieve instant recognition of the city they belong to, such as London and Paris of the more recognisable ones, but this also occurs for less renowned cities, such as Ljubljana, Granada and Szczecin, under certain conditions for narrower audiences.

Whilst wider urban and architectural elements represent all that is either part of open space and the built environment, often structurally and functionally inseparable from buildings, such as balconies, windows and chimneys, we focus here on the subgroup of elements added to streetscapes for functional purposes, elements which can be placed, removed and substi-

tuted without major intervention in terms of the built environment. For practical purposes, we have divided them into groups according to prevalent function: dividers, such as bollards and fences; pointers, such as street signs; informers, such as advertisement panels, billboards, and signboards; commercialist/gourmetist, such as kiosks, tables, vending machines, and coolers; trafficist, such as traffic signs, traffic lights, and street markings; infrastructuralist, such as waste bins, post boxes, and telephone booths; sojournist, such as benches and elements for sitting; culturalist, such as fountains, monuments, temporary stages, and graffiti; recreationalist, such as street chess and exercise equipment; playground equipment; and botanist, such as planting pots, ponds, and lawns. We have invented most of the names to suggest their function. Taxonomy, defining each group, is part of our research in progress; consequently, a full glossary of definitions is not yet available, and that is why we have illustrated each of the groups above with a few examples of representative objects.

SIGNIFIER AND SIGNIFIED

We need to look briefly into the communication process and the exchange of signs to understand which perception changes in relation to mundane, everyday street objects become significant in terms of spatial character, identity, and the like. Communication is one of the fundamental processes that establish, maintain and reaffirm social space and society. For communication to be successful, all parties involved need to understand the messages exchanged. According to Ehala (2017), the main purpose of communication is to convey meaning and that signs are the tools that make this possible. Saussure (1959) introduced the notions of *signifier* and *signified*. Ehala (2017) substitutes these with his own notions of *signal* and *meaning,* which he deems more evident. Saussure (1959) claims that the association between the signifier and signified is arbitrary but stable. There are three types of sign: icons, indices and symbols. In this paper, we will set aside symbols, the link between signifier and the signified being arbitrary and consensual, e.g. no visual or aural resemblance, and indices, the connection being natural, causal and logical. We will rely on icons instead, the link between the signal and meaning being purposeful, the signifier representing the signified by the virtue of resemblance (Ehala, 2017). This predominantly occurs in the visual domain, although not necessarily: particular sounds can also be characterised as iconic. What we will observe later in terms of iconic street objects is the evolution of the link between the signifier, the visual representation of a street object, and signified, the object itself, into a new link between signifiers and a higher notion of meaning beyond the initially denoted street objects.

Figure 1: The K2 Telephone Box and its subsequent iterations link the signifier and the signified to become a signifier for a whole nation, its identity, culture and way of life (Photo: S. Verovšek).

SIGNIFICANT STREET OBJECTS

Whilst researching the generic nature of everyday street objects, we came across the very particular, which were quite the opposite of anonymous and generic. This intrigued us to the extent that we wanted to divine their genius and how they become the carriers of spatial character and identity.

We found that there are three instances of similar mechanisms in relation to how involving elements become significant identifiers of urban places and their respective localities. Each instance looks into a different aspect of how these objects became significant carriers of spatial identity, how to recognise them and their identifiers, and those who identify with them. Some have even been elevated to cultural heritage status by either being listed as tangible heritage or as parts of industrial design collections in museums; for the purpose of this paper and debate clarity, we call them significant objects, where attachment significance is based on the dictionary definition of something si

Figure 2: The trash bin in this form is still recognised by some Ljubljana inhabitants as a street object that is representative of the capital (Photo: M. Juvančič).

gnificant being something that is important, noticeable and with special meaning. As aforementioned, our naming alludes to semiotics: the signified and signifier.

The individual representative artefact

One of the most instantaneously recognisable and distinguishing everyday street objects is the red telephone box; this utilitarian object has become a cultural icon for the United Kingdom and London, for everything British. Its design went through numerous iterations from K1 to K6. K2, Gilbert Scott's 1924 design in its easy-to--spot red, set the standards for the recognisable shape and colour associated with the object. Although its functional aspects are losing relevance in our cellular-phone-permeated society and its street numbers declining, it

still maintains its iconic status, and has, in many cases, been elevated to listed cultural heritage status. Be it a silhouette in black and white, or lone photograph, or placed out of its cultural context, it still transmits local character and identity regardless of where it is placed. This utilitarian street object that initially signified, housed and pointed to a specific service available in public spaces transcends its utilitarian function and meaning. The link between signifier and signified changed and it has become a signifier for a whole nation, its identity, culture and way of life.

Why do we detect this phenomenon with this particular phone box and not with the subsequent variations of analogue objects with the same function that have subsequently spread across the world? Part of the answer lies in product design identity references (Warell, 2015) and semiotics (Iilsted Hjelm, 2002). Although we will not delve into this topic, we can establish that further to its product identity and meaning, this mundane object as an individual artefact possesses strong spatial identity, even adding to other local identities when introduced. However, placed in or out of its local character, it attracts and subverts attention due to its iconic significance and does not blend into its surroundings.

Similarly recognisable individual mundane objects that have overcome their initial functional and utilitarian aspects are Paris Metro street signs. They are recognisable in various forms and always associated with the city from which they originate. Whilst the phone box is distinguishable in terms of its specific shape and colour, metro sign features vary markedly. It is the combination of style, typography, ornamentation and colour that makes them recognisable, with various combinations and numbers of these features present at any given sign.

The representative artefact need not be universally recognised to possess the spatial character of a locality. Some urban furniture is recognised and attached to places by only a limited circle of users, such as local inhabitants and frequent visitors. One such examples is shown in Figure 2. The link between Ljubljana, Ljubljana's inhabitants and frogs is not entirely clear: it might stem from the abundance of frogs on Barje's marshland on the outskirts of Ljubljana, so numerous, frogs legs became a local speciality, or it may come from the local dialect that substitutes the pronoun 'kaj' with 'kva', that resembles the sound produced by frogs, or a combination of both. It has been historically established and persistently finds its way into popular culture and slang: locals are sometimes derogatively called Žabarji (frog men).

Representative artefacts in series

Individual street objects recognised and associated with particular local, national, and specific spatial identities are rare. Our second group of significant street objec-

ts consists of artefacts that are not recognised if isolated that convey particular identities and/or spatial characters when arranged in series. Strolling the streets of Barcelona, visitors come across ensembles of fixed chairs placed in such a way that they form a group. The orientation of its elements varies, introducing playfulness into the composition, but also implying deeper social undertones. The chairs with their orientation towards each other and their closeness indicate and facilitate social contact; others facing away indicate seclusion and form semi-private spaces within public domains. Depending on mood, the company one is in and intention, users have a choice. Observing individual chairs from a functional and design point of view, one cannot instantly associate them with any particular locality or discuss iconic features: the chair is similar to others of its kind in the worldwide landscape of urban furniture, even varying in form and design. Arranging three such chairs in a group makes all the difference, and instantly spells 'Barcelona'. Putting them in a row would negate this effect and diminish reference to particular spatial character.

Similarly, once again referring to urban furniture dedicated for sitting, we come across Viennese foldable, green, garden chairs in Volksgarten. They are somewhat distinguished by their form, but, once again, their sequencing and composition, in a row, side by side, are the factors transmitting spatial identity, and identify them with Vienna and its particular locality.

Further examples of such reinforcement by placing similar street element in series are the recognisable wicker chairs and tables of Paris cafes and restaurants. The chairs are distinguished by their form, material, colour and specific use in series of two or more in combination with similarly designed tables. Either facing towards each other across the table or looking in the direction of the street, the chairs reference Paris culture and street life. They convey the bohemian flair that is often evident in other cultural settings whenever this atmosphere and Parisian way of life is desirable or profitable. The chair has achieved iconic status and has been elevated to the status of living movable cultural heritage: its manufacturers have been granted the title of Entreprise du Patrimoine Vivant (Living Heritage Company, or EPV) by the French government.

Representative collection of different artefacts

The third group is arguably the most interesting one as it does not rely on individual iconic and cult street objects, but conveys spatial character in terms of combinations of less recognisable objects that become carriers of spatial identity when grouped together. Looking for universally recognisable street element groupings, we again turn our intention to United Kingdom and London. Presenting three silhouettes of such elements, a phone box, a mailbox and a bench, would trigger instant recognition by a wide range of people. In this parti-

Figure 3: Street objects recognised by repetition and composition: urban furniture for sitting, spelling Vienna and Barcelona (Photo: M. Juvančič, Š. Verovšek).

cular case, one could argue, at least two of them belong in our first group of individually representative objects, and that grouping only reinforces their individual significance.

There are also less universally recognised groups of street elements that have become carriers of spatial identity and locality which might only trigger locality or spatial character recognition in specific local, regional and nation-wide user groups. In the case of Ljubljana's street objects, the group consists of objects that were commissioned specifically for the city, other objects that are evident in several towns in Slovenia, and those bought abroad as street furniture products. There is no single object instantly recognisable and attached to Ljubljana amongst them, but gathered in the group, they would be assuredly and positively identified by residents and frequent visitors alike. The group is heterogeneous in terms of object function, design, style, material, colour, age and historical value, but grouped like this, it spells Ljubljana. The reach of this group of objects' spatial identity transmission is, as aforementioned, limited to those that come across and use them in everyday life, that is, inhabitants and frequent visitors.

The mechanism of recognisability, applicable universally, is formed when users are faced with a limited number of object variations, their 'catalogue', and their repetition and consistent appearance in limited areas, e.g. within the boundaries of localities, municipalities, and states.

Such 'catalogues' of urban street furniture are not always presented in the convenient and recognisable fashion depicted in Figure 4. However, many cities possess this kind of collection sourced when the need for new urban street furniture arises. In these days of mass

Figure 4: Less individually, universally recognisable, but nevertheless a powerful representative collection of Ljubljana's street furniture that varies in shape, colour, style, material, and the like, grouped like this, spells Ljubljana (Illustration: Kozelj et al., 2013).

and culturally-aware tourism, cities and towns recognise that they need to present themselves adequately in this segment, too. By adding functionality to tastefully and strategically designed street furniture, they develop unifying images of cities that reinforces local spatial character whilst, at the same time, adding additional value in terms of image and recognisability. The Spanish city of Granada, with its immense endowment of cultural heritage treasures is no exception. Ignoring heritage, walking its streets, one finds a well-conceived collection of street elements that unobtrusively and uniquely distinguish Granada's street objects, reinforcing and adding to its character. In terms of material and shapes, one can trace Moorish influence, and the reinterpretation and evolution of street objects from ancient times to the present (Figure 5).

Less prominent and, at present, in urban design and street life underdeveloped Polish city of Szczecin possesses, or used to possess until a decade ago, a collection of street furniture strongly connected to its recent, post-WWII history (Figure 6). Similar street objects were met throughout Polish cities during the Socialist period and remain, when *in situ*, carriers of

unique spatial identity, and they are endangered with the onslaught of modern, generic and bland urban furniture deemed superior to the old, simplistic, quite rudimentary but nonetheless charming, full of character furniture. Be they specific bus stop signs or bus stops ensembles of furniture, particular fences in strong yellows or blues, and kiosks or waste bin baskets throughout the cities, they embellish their respective cities, whether residents and local authorities like them and identify with them or not.

CONCLUSION

Mundane street objects, though often overlooked and cast in a lesser role when compared to other architectural elements, constitute an important part of urban ecosystems and, at times, contribute significantly to the spatial character and identity of places.

This paper identifies these objects, connects them to spatial character, and particularly exposes the aspects which drive some of them away from being universal and generic towards them being identifiable and particular carriers of local spatial identity. Supported

Figure 5: A collection of street elements and objects in Granada, Spain, which conveys spatial character and, assembled as such, acts as a locality identifier (Photo: M. Juvančič).


Figure 6: A collection of anonymous street artefacts in Szczecin, Poland. Such artefacts can be found in different parts of the country but there are some unique features that make them identifiable and connected to particular localities and their spatial character (Photo: M. Juvančič).

by examples, we have shown three means by which these significant elements acquire recognisable spatial identity as individual objects, as representative series of objects, and as groups of objects. Their reach varies, and is locally, regionally, nationally, internationally, and sometimes universally associated with a particular spatial identity, character and/or locality.

The mechanism by which street objects become carriers of spatial character, local, sometimes even regional and national identity, is similar in all three instances. Based on a social constructivist purview of the world and a structuralist approach to communication and sign theory, street objects as icons, whether *in situ*, depicted in photographs, represented in drawings and pictures in different fashions and even described in text, denote more than just their functional aspect and intended use. All of the given examples trace the evolution of the link between the signifier, a street object or its visual representation, and the signified, the functional object itself, into a new connection between the signifier and higher notions of meaning, such as locality, city, nation, country, and the like, beyond the initially denoted street object and its fundamental role and functionality (Figure 7). Whilst such evolution occurred by chance in the past, it is not left so today, as it is, often intended and planned for.
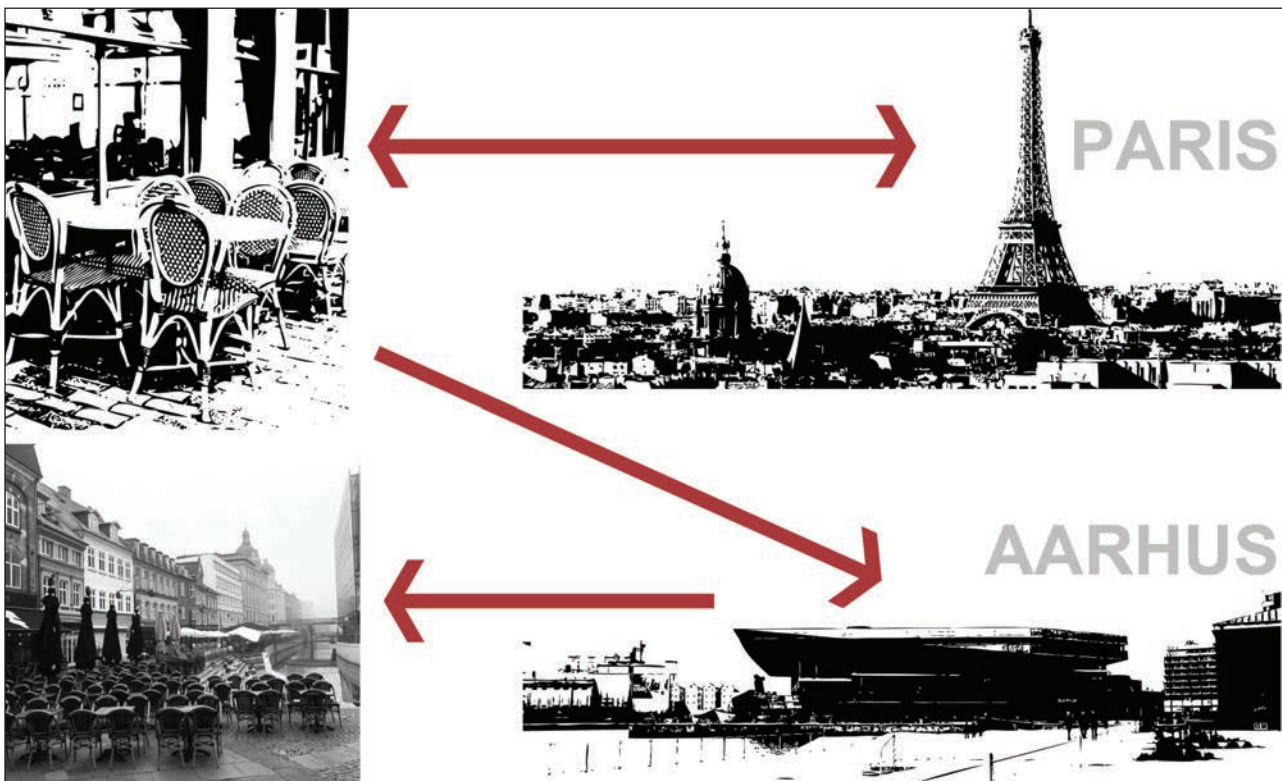
Figure 7: An example of the evolution of the link between the signifier and the signified: the chairs as functional and iconic Parisian objects, placed in the streets of Aarhus, where their presence goes beyond the functional and intentionally alludes to the bohemian, outdoorsy, Parisian way of life and culture (Illustration: M. Juvančič).

Whilst we have not precisely indicated how and why our findings are useful, we clearly allude to situations where street object recognisability is of advantage; cultural tourism, the reinforcing of local identity and character, the preservation and care of historically and culturally significant street objects come to mind, but raising awareness that street objects are important parts of urban scenery needs to be carefully considered, the objects intentional and always seen not just in terms of function, but also from the standpoint of spatial identity, are, nonetheless, the key implications of this paper.

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POVZETEK

Prostorski značaj je neotipljiv, a pomemben del naše kulturne dediščine in urbanih ‚ekosistemov‘. Kolaž objektov, stavb, krajin, njihova uporaba in preoblikovanje skozi stoletja ter edinstvena pojavnost v določenih časovnih trenutkih dajejo prostorom prostorsko identiteto in edinstvenost. Ta prispevek se osredotoča na vseprisotne, vsakdanje objekte in ulično pohištvo. Ti so v naših urbanih prostorih pogosto spregledani, v diskusiji o kulturni dediščini pa se le redko zdijo pomembni. Kljub temu, da so si po obliki in funkciji vedno bolj podobni in globalizirani, lahko v določenih primerih izražajo tudi lokalni značaj in služijo kot nosilci kulturne in prostorske identitete. Že nabor silhuet takšnih elementov lahko vzbudi takojšnjo prepoznavo mesta, v katerega sodijo, na primer Londona in Pariza, pa tudi manj znanih mest, kot so na primer Ljubljana, Granada ali Szczecin. V članku identificiramo vsakdanje ulične artefakte, pojasnimo njihovo vlogo pri soustvarjanju prostorskega značaja in prikažemo tri načine prepoznavnosti, kjer je takšne objekte mogoče prepoznati za nosilce prostorske identitete.

Preko nanizanih primerov lahko sledimo trem mehanizmom prepoznavnosti, ki običajne in generične ulične objekte povzdignejo med objekte, ki poleg svoje funkcionalnosti, pomembno doprinašajo k prostorskemu značaju. Med njimi ločimo med posameznimi predmeti kot univerzalnimi ikonografskimi nosilci, kjer se je zgodil preskok med zaznamujočim in zaznamovanim na način, da je zaznamovano zraslo na pomenski hierarhiji v širše razsežnosti, preko funkcionalnih meja zaznamujočega (npr. zaznamuje mesto, državo, način življenja). Na podoben način prihaja do preskokov tudi pri skupini predmetov, ki prepoznavnost dosežejo s ponavljanjem istega predmeta ter skupini predmetov, ki prepoznavnost dosežejo z raznovrstnim, a edinstvenim naborom. Doseg prostorske prepoznavnosti znotraj predstavljenih primerov pričakovano variira od prepoznave s strani lokalnih prebivalcev, do večjih in celo globalnih razsežnosti prepoznav.

Ključne besede: prostorski značaj, prostorska identiteta, kulturna dediščina, urbana oprema, ulično pohištvo, znak, ikona, zaznamujoče, zaznamovano

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