

Conserving Sense of Place: A Case of Traditional City

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to understand the identity of the precincts located in a traditional city. Key attributes such as spatial, physical, etc., are studied to understand the sense of place. Further, the paper hypothesises that there is a constant change in the transformation process of the urban environment. The urban identity (sense of place) of such built environments, by way of its locational, spatial and associational attributes, has tremendous vulnerability towards losing its character by contrasting nature and scales of newer developments. The paper suggests approaches for conserving the sense of place within the traditional city.

Key words: Sense of place, traditional city, conservation, precincts

1. INTRODUCTION

The city is one of the most complex forms, consisting an array of functions at varying scales, occurring simultaneously in chorus and in close proximity. The complexity of the city as an entity is a result of various factors. At any given point of time, it displays a tremendous variety of diverse functions within controlled spatial confines. The magnitude of human activities today is larger than in any other type of human organization as seen through history. The range of activities occurring in the city varies from the discrete private to collective public scales. Further, the city is always in a process of change and transformation (Figure 1).

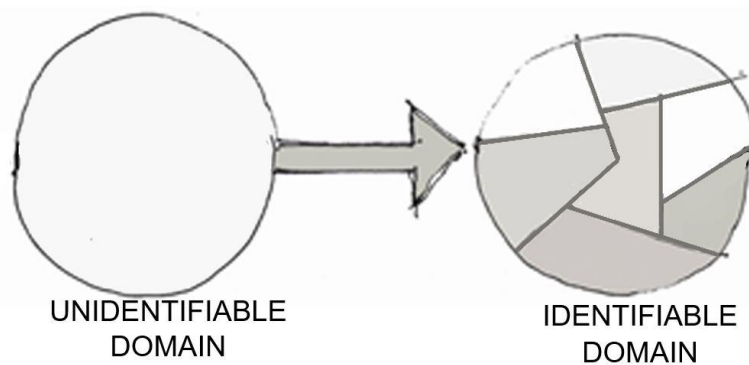


Figure 1: Transformation from unidentifiable to identifiable domains

The inhabitants of the city seek an identity within this complex pattern. The pattern reflects the orders – the form of society and its interrelationships to the lifestyles of its people. And, this identity of the individual gets reflected in the built environment which makes it distinct from the others, thus giving it an identity of its own. This is how most of the traditional cities have grown and evolved through time. In as much as society is a dynamic and changing entity, so is the form of the city also in a state of change. The process of change as an adaptation to new forces is as much evident in the form of the city (visible parameters) as it is in the social relationships (invisible parameters) (Figure 2).

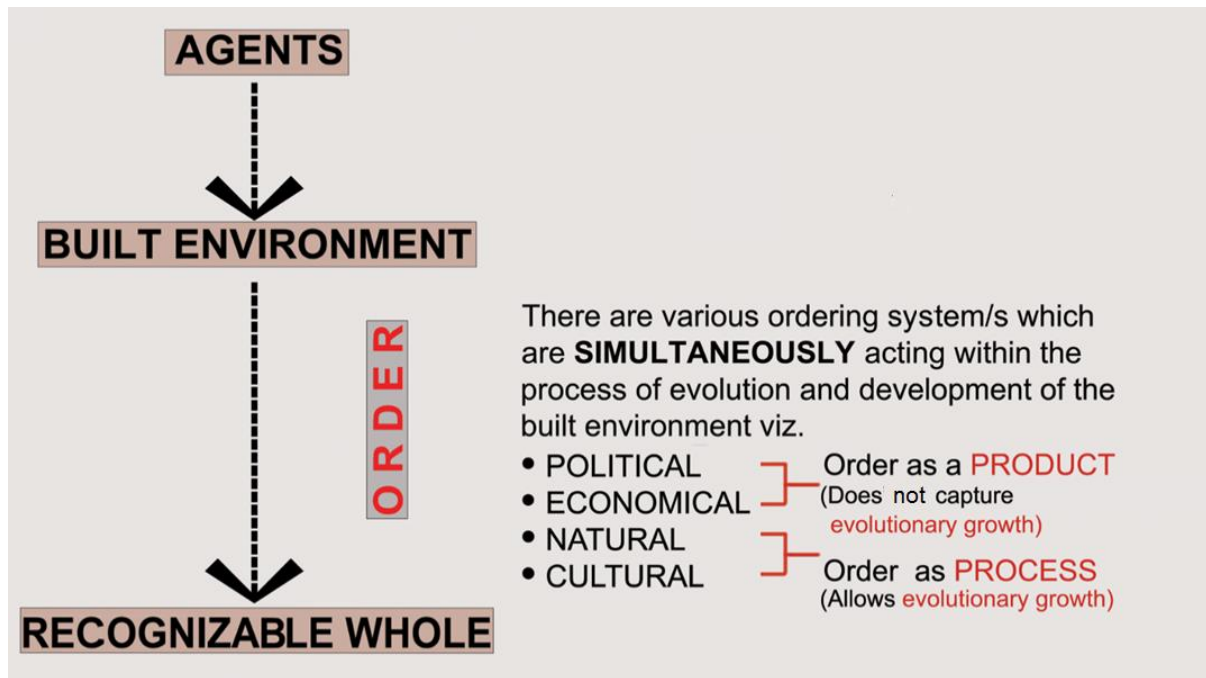


Figure 2: Simultaneous orders acting on built environment

1.1 Case: Traditional Indian cities

Cities around the world are transforming to conform to the pressures of the changing global economy. Globalization – the growing integration of economies and societies is a phenomenon that is creeping into the culture of most of the cities around the globe. As a term, it seems that it originated quite symbolically as it turns out in an American Express advertising campaign in the mid-1970s (Marshall, 2003). It was a phenomenon which was waiting for a catchphrase slogan and, once created, the word spread rapidly to encapsulate what has developed. *The intensification of worldwide social relations in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa* (Appadurai, 2005).

Rapid growth and decline of poverty in developing countries like India, Brazil and China that were poor three to four decades ago, has been a constructive and progressive aspect of the globalization phenomenon. However, this phenomenon over time has created substantial resistance over alarming situation of environmental exploitation and degradation. Cities rapidly growing under urbanization and globalization are creating an

alarming situation in majority of the cities around the world. The relation between human nature and urban form / environment is in a dubious state in majority of the cities. The same is much more apparently observed in traditional Indian cities.

Indians are well aware, if not pleasingly, that their nation is developing at a fast pace today. This growth is both physical with new structures being built, along with old ones giving way for development of new structures either by destruction or/ and transformation of the old along with the economic progress. Certain aspects of this growth are evidently very positive, presenting advantages of state-of-the-art infrastructure, better lifestyle, amenities and new prospects for the people who required but lacked for long and so on. Whereas, certain aspects not as positive, and are alarming and even more worrisome feeder to unhealthy developmental processes that may soon be disastrous.

Assuming the definition of globalization as defined above, the most worrisome part as far as Indian traditional cities is concerned, the phenomenon of globalization many a times acts as an imposition not only physically but also mentally. As seen through history, most patterns that professionals in the Indian context try to achieve are invariably, and unquestioningly, adopted from a culture and society which once colonized India, and their continued use almost seven decades after independence is suggestive of the larger malaise afflicting the profession.

The paper uses Pune as a case for referencing and to connect to the larger concerns mentioned above. Pune having a rich historical background of heritage and culture over centuries has evolved a peculiar identity and image for itself, be it the Queen of the Deccan or the Oxford of the East or the Pensioners Paradise or the Cultural capital of Maharashtra and so on. This sense of identity has been lost largely due to the insensitive and unsuitable development in this globalized era. The city as a unified whole was an overlapping / a collage of various layers that had its own identity which cumulatively fuelled in to evolve and frame a larger holistic identity of Pune. The same is under the threat of losing its sense of identity (both at the part and a holistic scale) under the negative facets of globalization.

2. AGENDA FOR URBAN DESIGN

The question that arises, how can improved growth be promoted that repairs and improves the existing and lays the framework for the new development (making places qualitatively enhanced, instead of a poorer quality and impacting the identity / sense of place)? How wisdom and gifts of the bygone era (handed down by tradition not be treated as dead relics, but as a living vigour that infuses time with a better vitality and robustness) be maintained?

A much deeper understanding is required to understand the complexly ordered processes within the Indian cities, be it the phenomenon of morphogenesis, systems and distinct elements following simple local guidelines to produce emergent global complexity; and the self-ordering processes of economy and cultural actions, that have created, for instance the rich layered intricacies of traditional settlements through history. Urban design should be concerned with the process of crafting and as an approach - how qualitative and meaningful characteristics materialize from such a process; rather than the urban form itself i.e. the

product. Urban design deals more directly with the issue of processes. What is the process for understanding the sense of place? What are the steps to be followed?

The insight for the above comes from traditional cultures, as it so often does in such cases by observing how building traditions directed people in specific stages of building, and in how those steps responded to their setting.

3. ISSUES RELATED WITH CONTEMPORARY TREND

Globalization has led to the emergence of a liberating ‘one world’ phenomenon as the maturation of the explosive capitalist and post capitalist system (Marshall, 2003). This integration of economies further leads to large scale developments in many developing countries like India. These can be broadly categorized under three major heads, viz. (i) large scale gated housing communities, (ii) large scale commercial development and (iii) infrastructural development. Majority of these large scale projects have just become a means in itself of creating a product and getting money out of it instead of being a part of a process in the overall structuring of the area (the city and region). In the process of creating such products of development they fail to address both the natural and the man-made environments. This attitude of development has adversely affected the quality and character of the traditional built environment. The same is seen all over the city and the nature of development mentioned above on M.G. Road is a part of the Pune Cantonment Board. It has its own timeless character related to place as is seen in the left image below (Figure 3). Whereas, the same is rapidly transforming in a manner that it is in the process of losing its identity in the near future if the nature of developmental transformation as seen in the right image below persists.



Figure 3: Contrasting nature of scale and development affecting the character and sense of place at M.G. Road, Camp, Pune.

Most of these projects discussed are seen as large scale architectural projects. The architect’s obsession with architectural and urban form, more often than not is a tendency to put a layer of sheen over the much complex and multiple (e.g. political, economic) parameters that essentially formulate the city and create it as an enriching (e.g. social) experience. Here it is of concern about the purpose of urban design which is in a state of flux. In this context, the discipline of urban design falls short of a clear definition (and hence a beneficial understanding) and a clear path (and hence, a meaningful intent) owing

to its varied description as an abstruse overlay of the disciplines (of urban and regional planning, architecture, landscape urbanism, urban conservation and civil engineering) on one hand, and as a discipline that generally supports design, development and growth of cities on the other. Another concern with present situation of urban design thought and practice is the sense that it is architecture, only at a larger scale. In this school of thought there is far too much emphasis on design (e.g. aesthetics) and not enough of an understanding of phenomenon of 'urban' (e.g. how cities actually evolve and work) (Inam, 2002). The discipline of urban design today strangely has, as perceived in majority of cases, been condensed to an act of beautification. The public spaces are created in a manner that makes them seemingly beautiful with minimal or no deliberation in which the same establishes a relation and connection with the surrounding built context (both physically as well as intangibly). The public realm enclosed is naively understood to be autonomous of the realm enclosing it. The result: a spatial entity which is reduced to imagery, disassociated and temporal in its basic conception. 'Sense of place' is under threat by pressures of these models of development. The one major reason for the problem is the lack of answering or rather questioning *what works* and in *which place*. The same is evident in Figure 4 which is the case of indigenous market area in the historic core of Pune. The challenge here is not only to define the nature of newer developments typomorphologically on the lands (which are in the immediate proximity of the old historic settlements) but also to define the role of planning and policy making (which play an important part in the place making phenomenon). One identifies other persistent negative themes in the current practice of design of the public realm. These include the privatization of public space, disinvestment in the public realm, the social exclusion (even social apartheid of gentrification, and the over decoration and skin deep application of cosmetics) slapped onto the various element of public realm interspersed by public art commissioned by corporate patrons and others of questionable nature and worth.



Figure 4: Raviwar Peth, Core Area, Pune.

4. EMERGING QUESTIONS

1. What are the aspects which help define the identity or the character of a place?
2. What are the major issues identified for the loss of the sense of place?
3. Why is there a need to retain the sense of place/s of precincts, within a city?
4. What is the role of urban designer and how is he equipped to implement the same?

4.1 Aspects of the identity or the character of a place

Cullen (1961) emphasised on physical aspects such as stylistic design approach, articulated decoration and others (the way structures open up into public spaces, entrances, vistas, avenues, landmarks and likewise as an aspect which gives the place a sense). Cullen's *Townscape* (Cullen, 1961) was a European approach to urban design, incorporating the notions of serial vision, sense of place, and the assets of contextual approach. This is typically an objective conventional interpretation of urban design. Lynch (1960) stressed on psychology of place (summed in the idea of mental maps used by people as referential directors to urban destinations and places). In the process of doing so, people depend on their senses to get informed the way a place senses. Additionally, various theorists have dealt with the design of urban public space more directly, particularly Christopher Alexander in his pursuit of cross-cultural, timeless thumb rules for architecture and urban design. He was of the view that any building, neighbourhood, precinct or a town/ city shall be active and thriving with life only if that is governed by the timeless way (Alexander, 1979). It is a process which cannot be attained by extrinsic applied methods as it brings order out of nothing but ourselves, only if we allow the same. There is a principal quality and sense which is essential criteria of life and the spirit of mankind, a building or of nature itself. This sense and quality cannot be named, though being objective and particular.

In order to describe this qualitative values in cities it must be understood that, every place is given its character by certain patterns of events that keep on happening there (Alexander, 1979). This is subjective and romantic outlook of urban design. If the above two methodologies were to be merged, it would be observed that the quality of urban design needs to be deliberated in a much wider spectrum than the physical attributes of the built environment. A few thinkers have tried to negotiate this gap and most remain either physical determinists or subjective mental mappers. Canters understands 'place' as a construct of three factors – physical setting, conception, and activity (Canter, 1977). The latter, having also been regarded as the 'premise for place-making' by Jacobs (1961) and Gehl & Gemzøe (1996) argue that popular and active urban places are placed predominantly on street life, and the innumerable methods in which public activity happens in and around the spaces between buildings. Yet one always is biased that the idea of urban quality is clearly and more significantly associated with the socio-cultural and psychological dimensions of place. It is reflected by the dialogue or conversation which the people have with the built environment.

- *LOCATION*
- having certain *KINDS OF SPACES*
- having certain *ORIENTATIONAL SYSTEMS*
- having certain *ELEMENTS*
- being *NAMED* in certain ways
- having certain *KIND OF PEOPLE*
- engaged in certain *KIND OF ACTIVITIES*
- having certain *COLOR AND TEXTURE*
- having certain *SMELL AND SOUND*

Figure 5: Parameters that gives a place an identity or a sense.

Bohri Aali, an indigenous market place in Pune, is one of the cases to demonstrate the parameters that gives rise to ‘sense of place’. *Bohri* represents the predominant community residing in the precinct and *Aali* the native usually referred to the streets. Further, the precinct has a peculiar nature of shops (ranging from hardware to stationary to seasonal festival market). This articulation is expressed in the form of color and texture, smell and sound and many such varied factors. The simultaneity and the coexistence of this varied nature of activities gives it a peculiar flavour and a sense of identity as seen in Figure 4, 6 and 8 which to many may seem as a chaotic order.

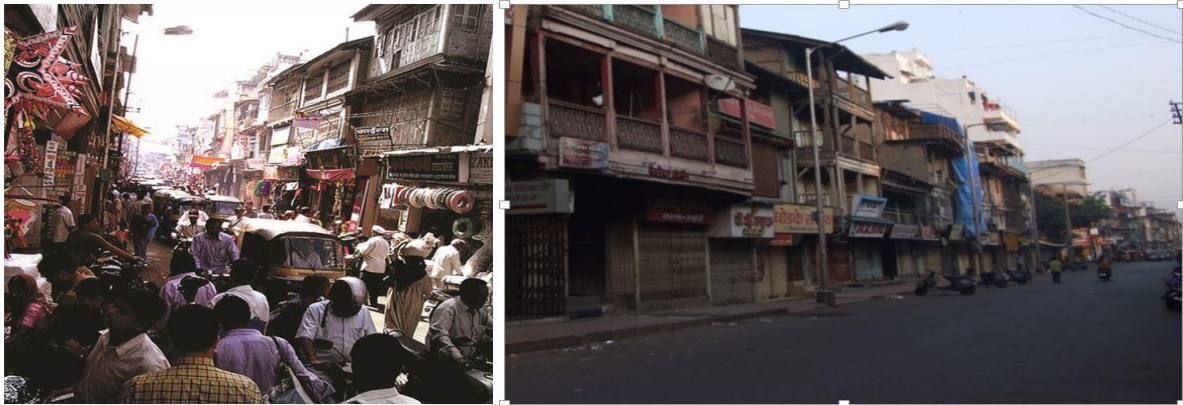


Figure 6: Bohri Aali, Core Area, Pune

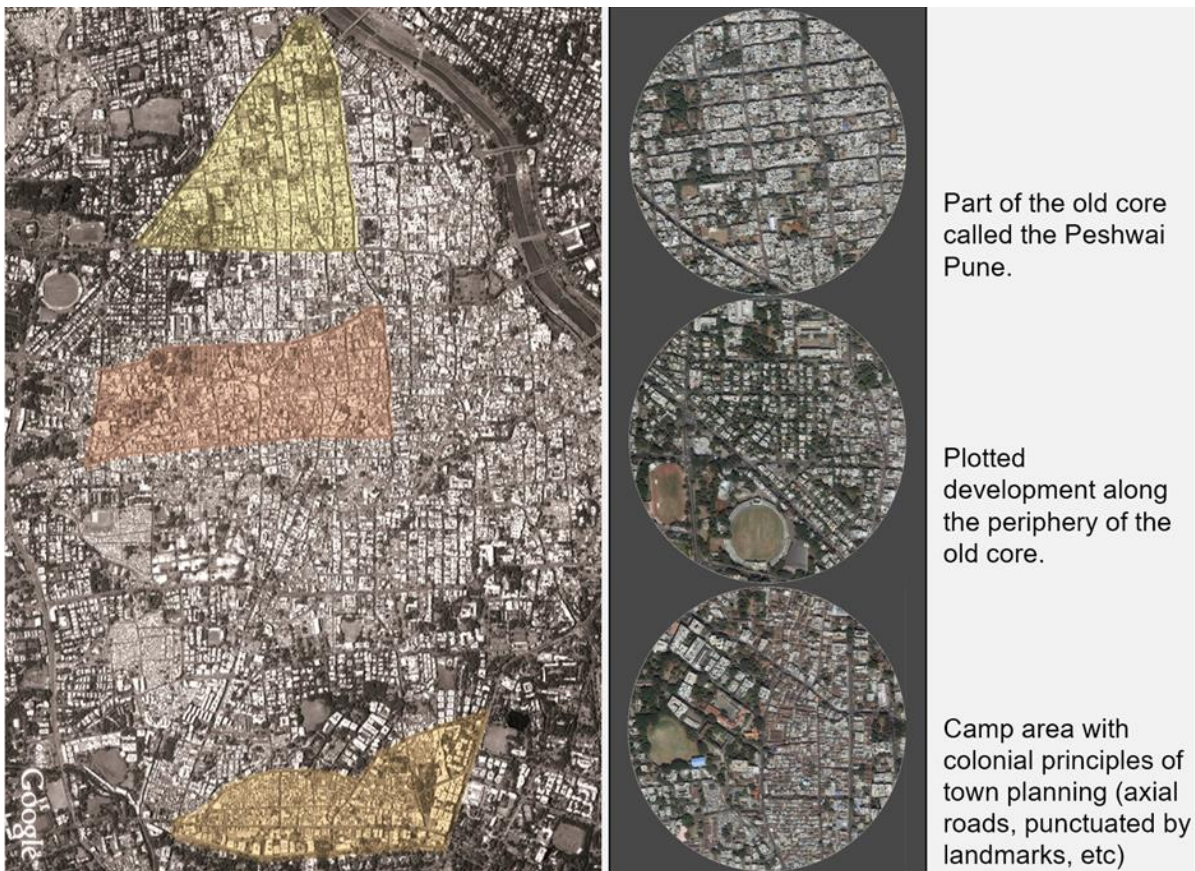


Figure 7: Precincts with peculiar identities as highlighted a few in satellite image of Pune

Various cases as distinct case as Bohri Aali can be found in the city with a peculiar identity rooted to the loci. The city is a collage of such diverse identities giving it a unified holistic identity.

4.2 Loss of ‘Sense of Place’

Continuous construction activity by demolition/ transformation of the existing fabric, the present form and nature of change threatens to have imposed urban and architectural forms with no contextual characteristics. Amalgamation and pooling of plots to the extent that kills the diversity (that the smaller urban grain size) speculating the death of the urban block. The transformation of the residential fabric into commercial and such complexities is evident in Bohri Aali. A majority of the Bohri community started moving out of the precinct towards the outskirts of Pune. The residential fabric in Bohri Aali is converted to commercial and warehouses. This is creating an imbalance through mixed use and the diversity of the precinct.

4.3 Conserving ‘Sense of Place’

Precincts with a sense of place have a role to play in a larger context of the city and the society. Such precincts must be looked at as a resource, as a place having interaction of the culture and the built environment. Such places are not just ‘another place of business and residence’, but are essential areas giving an identity to the place reflecting the personality. Therefore, such places demand a different intervention and development must not be compared to the other areas of the city. City requires diversity in order to survive as organism (Habraken, 1998). Therefore, it becomes the responsibility of the city to compensate such diverse areas and helps in keeping the balance of various aspects within the city.



Figure 8: Market Street in Raviwar Peth, Core Area, Pune.

4.4 Role of urban designers

The role of urban designer in such a context would be more of a facilitator maintaining their diversity and distinct flavours. Knowing and understanding the quality of the built environment (types, patterns, systems, and styles) can be through strengthening the relationship between the inhabitant and the built environment.



Figure 9: Market Street at Subahhshah Dargah, Core Area, Pune.

5. APPROACH

More often than not the problems as discussed above are understood by their end result i.e. the contemporary built form. Often it is forgotten that the actual issue is not the form in itself but the process which makes it. Aspects of the traditional built environment that were once controlled by the local people are now controlled by the professionals. Therefore, most of our built environment becomes a designed environment where the focus is on the product rather than the process (Habraken, 1998).

The built environment today is losing its quality and sensitivity due to the lack of understanding. Habraken (1998) terms this phenomenon as the ordinary or the common (physically, socially and culturally) and various relationships (individual and community, individual and the built, the whole and the part, the professional and the end user, past and the present). Therefore in order to conserve, there is a need to consider the context of time, human needs, place, sense of quality and rootedness.

Insights from varied subjects may be drawn about natural environment with no strategy plan (in the conventional sense), rather the focus may be to transform and renovate and mutate the present whole into a new totality. In the process of achieving so, the essential structure can be conserved by strengthening, articulating and deepening it in a significant manner. The same is evident in the process of transformation of biological patterns (Alexander, 1979).

Over a period of time, in the conservation of Manek Chowk, Chandani Chowk, Tulsi Baug and many more, the essence was sustained. The above mentioned places were not entirely revamped and rebuilt so as to retain the original character. Instead, it was always continuous process, with human intervention playing a controlled part within what might be understood as “*dance of the centuries*,” as Alexander refers it as.

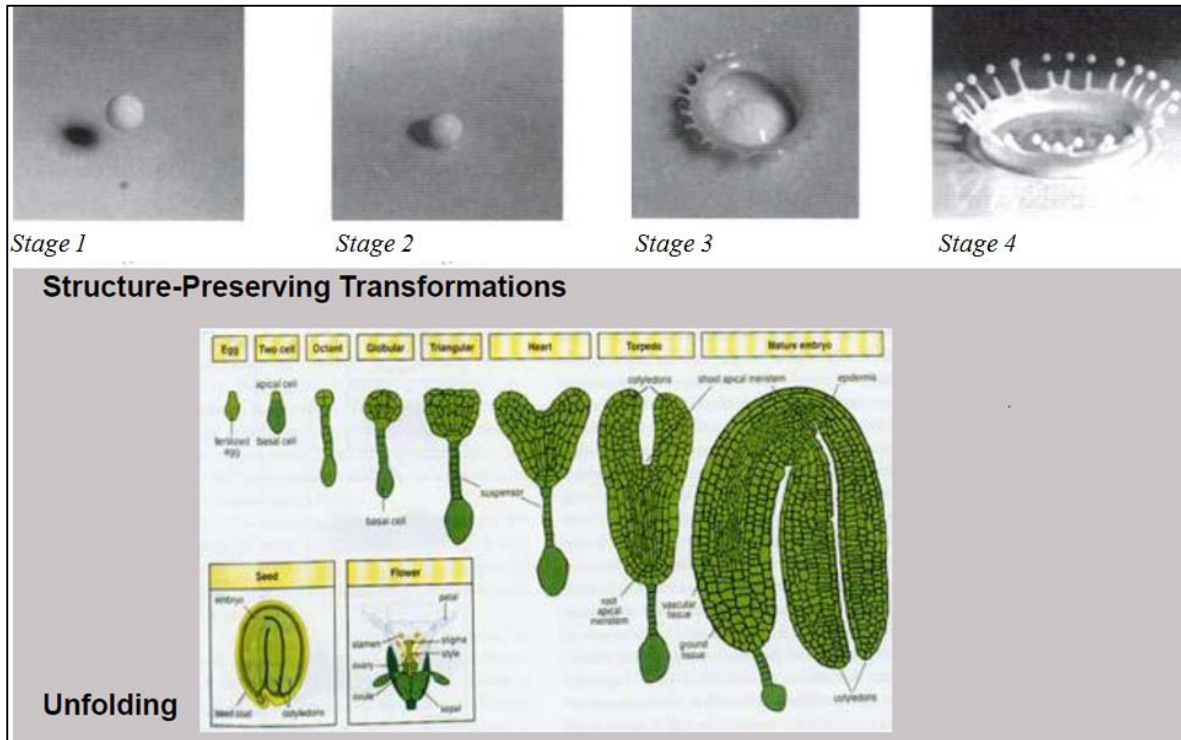


Figure 10: Christopher Alexander's diagram of evolutionary growth and transformation.

6. CONCLUSION

It is not advisable to entrust a limited number of traditional buildings/ precincts to fossilization / preservation, while the remaining world is continuously developing and transforming in varied new ways and forms. The evolutionary processes that yield adaptive morphogenesis seem to be inconsistent in lieu to attain a sustainable balance. If it is not sustainable then our very continued existence will be threatened. This in turn is leading to tremendous pressure to re-evaluate, reassess, restructure the methods of creating and transforming the built environment. A cultured, evolutionary and meaningful operational system for the development and growth of traditional towns/ cities is the need of the hour.

Hence, the paper does not intend to recommend a mere replication of traditional structures and urban patterns from a bygone era. As generally observed, any living process always undergoes the process of transformation and mutation, and to retain the traditions those shaped them with time and revitalize the same within the context of globalization.

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