Notes on interdisciplinary perspectives of local colour identity

Johnny Jie Xu

School of the Arts, English and Drama, Loughborough University, UK
Email: j.xu3@lboro.ac.uk

The identity of a place is determined by its location and characteristics. Colour identity is a pervasive and persistent characteristic of a place that enhances the visual experience, and helps to create a familiar environment. The local colourscape, i.e. colours of the perceptual elements related to local characteristics, is embedded in the shared memory of a group of people, and may differentiate insiders from outsiders. Colour is a key feature in people's experience of a place, and, as a distinctive visual component of urban heritage, colour is integral to creating and shaping the cultural identities of cities. This offers a way to counter the influence of globalisation, which tends to homogenise cities, making them all appear to be the same place. Local colour may be seen as a source of difference of cultural identities, which globalisation cannot entirely eradicate. The field of colour culture calls for an interdisciplinary approach, and these notes provide a theoretical basis for how colour can help to construct identity of place in the urban environment.

Introduction

In the global village of today, the urban environment needs an identity with its own characteristic elements, specific to an urban landscape [1]. Colour is an important feature in people's experience of a place and provides a unique characteristic that distinguishes one place from another in an increasingly competitive urban context. In short, colour is one of the elements that gives place its identity.

A considerable bulk of the literature on local identity focuses on the notion of 'placelessness'. Thus, there is less research on colour and identity of place than might be expected. The main objective of this article is to explain why colour is important for constructing an identity of place, especially within a local dimension. The research reported here can help to develop a better understanding of local colour identity, and serve as a potential resource for escaping the blandness of colour uniformity.

By 'local identity', two layers of meaning are intended: the first is the characteristic of a place (*Merriam-Webster*), while the second is a sense of belonging to the area where you live (*Collins*). These definitions imply two key elements – structure and meaning – for understanding the genius loci [2]. Structure denotes the formal properties of local place concerning the relation in a physical system. Local colour might contribute to local material that suggests a stable association; whereas meaning is a psychological function that depends on identification implying a sense of 'belonging'. In this sense, structure and meaning are aspects of the same totality [2].

As far as physical and psychological aspects are concerned, the study of colour and local identity should take an interdisciplinary approach that provides a wider view and generates a profound understanding. Aspects include physical structure, psychological effect, historical and cultural viewpoints, and the relationship between global and local, all of which concern colour identity and its impact on the local level of urban environment.

This paper is part of a literature review from the early stage of PhD research and exposes supporting theories, such as Norberg-Schulz's phenomenology of place. In particular, Relph's insiderness and outsiderness framework for identity of place shows how colour can actively be engaged in helping to construct identity of place. However, the intention of this exploratory research is not to propose a conclusive theory, but to develop a theoretical understanding that could be useful for further research.

Local colourscape

The identity of a place is determined by its location, general spatial configuration and environmental characteristics [2]. It implies the physical structure of local environment, denoting the formal properties of a system of relationships. Place is an address of a street, district, town and city. The physical attribution to a place in a three-dimensional space is what people conceive. The totality of its physical setting forms the phenomenon of place. Norberg-Schulz interprets 'place' as a totality made up of concrete things having material substance, shape, texture and colour [2]. Physical and visual distinctiveness aid the creation of place images and identities [3].

In general, the physical elements can be divided into (1) the 'visual object', which is a distinct individual form of urban place, and (2) the 'visual index' (or perception index), which enables people to identify the visual objects [4]. Colour is relevant to both visual object and visual index, from which it is plausible to infer the concepts colour object and colour index. In order to avoid confusion from index as sign, the phrase 'colour referent' is preferred here, because the concept of referent establishes a norm for analysing the interpretation of meaning. It suggests that the attribute is referring to some samples, which implies a comparison model in a psychological sense.

However, these are not fixed terms for a certain physical object. Colour is sometimes used to address the identity of objects, and, on some occasions, colour can be considered as a reference for understanding a contextual setting. Colour can be understood as a compelling, exact and calculated medium for producing and reproducing knowledge [5] and, when associated with natural or built environments in space, it may be called, in Lancaster's term, 'colourscape' [6]. The concept of local

colourscape refers to all colours of the perceptual elements of the urban environment related to local characteristics (see Figure 1). As colour is usually seen only as a property of objects, and colour vision is only one aspect of our visual capabilities, it follows that much colour information is likely to be filtered out. Heer uses the term 'local tone' (*ton local*) to describe the characteristic colour property [7].

Green-Armytage defines the concept of local colour as 'all signs, sounds, smells and tastes, impressions of space and time, physical meetings and social interactions that an individual experiences in space' [8]. Lenclos and Lenclos further suggest that local colour plays an important role in defining the cultural identity of nations, provinces, cities, and all other human agglomerations, and hence local colour is the real colour of an individual locality [9].

Figure 1: The colourscape of Narborough Road, Leicester, UK (Photos: Xu, 2017).

Both definitions suggest that local colour is determined by the geographic and time frame in which it exists. The geographical scape of colour should include the natural and climatic colour as well as man-made colours. According to Lenclos and Lenclos, geography of colours is the specificity of the traditional colours of the built environment and is closely related to regional and environmental differences [9]. The colour of a city can be regarded as an aspect of its history. For example, in order to protect colour traditions, certain cities – such as Venice – exercise legislative colour control. The chromatic identity of certain structures is immutable [10], and the value of colour traditions is in their unifying effect and affirmation of local character [6].

Attachment: sense of belonging

Apart from visual simulation through physical environmental settings, local dwellers also require an identity of place to sustain psychological needs. Norberg-Schulz summarises two mental functions involved in identity of place: 'orientation' and 'identification'. The orientation provides visual cues for

people to know where they are located, and identification manages to inform people where they belong [2]. The desire to be from somewhere, to have a sense of roots and a feeling of belonging are key features of the quest for personal identity in a postmodern society [11].

Meaning is a psychic function; it depends on identification, and implies a sense of 'belonging' [2]. Meaningful identity is most often linked to a sense of place, personal and social belonging and history, actual or imagined. It is structured not only by class, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation, but also by racialised forms of subjectification, which seeks to limit what any individual can claim to be. Whereas a sense of belonging can be variously found in families, communities and groups united by oppression or marginalisation [11].

Colour identity is a pervasive and persistent characteristic of a place that enhances the visual experience, and creates a familiar environment. The environment is not just a drawn boundary as 'a sense of place', but is also the 'content' of the experience, imparting a sense of belonging. Barth called the former 'nominal identity' and the latter 'virtual identity' [12]. In contrast to nominal identity, the virtual identity arises from the psychological effect of social groups.

Referring to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the terms 'physiological', 'safety', 'belonging', 'self-esteem' and 'self-actualisation' are used to describe the pattern through which human motivations generally progress. Lidwell *et al.* further explain the principle of hierarchy of needs specifically in design [13]. After satisfying low-level needs like functionality, the higher levels of design needs can be addressed. An example could be reliability, which seeks to establish a stable connection between design and people (Figure 2).
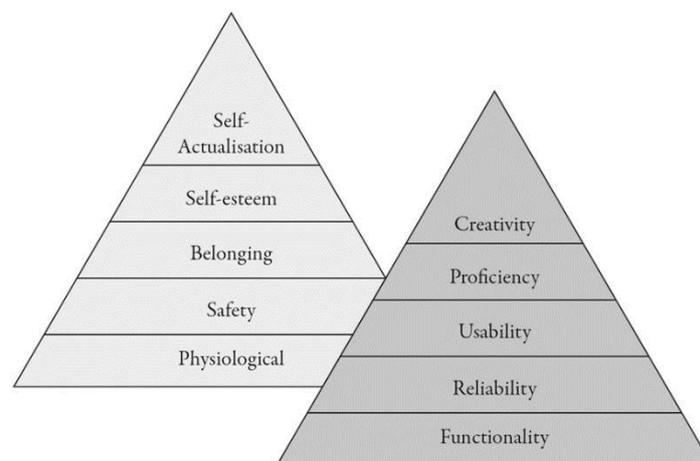

Figure 2: The hierarchy of needs in design is adapted from Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Source: Lidwell et al., 2003).

Based on the concepts of safety and belongingness, John Bowlby developed an attachment theory in psychology. Attachment is an overall term which refers to the state and quality of an individual's attachments. These can be divided into secure and insecure attachment. Like many psychodynamic terms, attachment carries both experiential and theoretical overtones [14]. Attachment is a psychological effect that provides the feeling of security and moreover the emotional sense of belonging. Holms quotes Weiss and further explains that an attachment relationship can be defined by the presence of three key features [14]: (a) Proximity seeking to a preferred figure; (b) The 'secure base' effect; and (c) Separation protest.

The first feature can be understood as a referent in semiotics, which is a clue for decoding the meaning. The second point suggests a content of security, where the feeling of safety comes from.

Unver and Ozturk note that a very important element in the assessment and cognitive and affective judgments of colour is familiarity [15]. A consistent colour environment evokes emotional attachment by habitants, such as red street furniture and transportation in London. The third point emphasises a connected bond that ties together certain groups, neighbourhoods, or residents of a city.

From understanding of the attachment relationship, a colour symbol or specific colour identity can be attached to people, in terms of their common agreed referent. The form of behaviour approximates to a sense of belonging. The purpose of identity is to connect the same cultural or social group and the connection or separation can be triggered from a local colour identity (Figure 3).
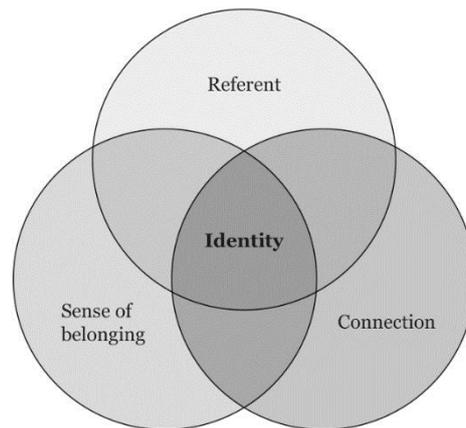

Figure 3: Identity in attachment dimensions.

Lynch believes that a distinctive urban environment causes people to make strong attachments, whether of past history or of their own experience [16]. Every urban image is instantly recognisable, and brings to mind a set of associations. The visual environment becomes an integral piece of the inhabitants' lives [16]. The urban context and its identity have a direct relationship with the extent of an individual's involvement in the urban experience. Nevertheless, the sense of belonging is not only a linkage to local place, but also extensively to a wider world.

Collective memory of local colour

With a long-lasting time frame, the colour system of cities becomes part of historical civilisation. The use of colour is based on one's life-experience in the context of natural and material surroundings, while concurrently relying on colour symbolism – the 'collective experience' of the past generations [17]. The colour identity of a city is intertwined with the heritage of local or regional culture. Tradition is finally nothing but reformed memory, more organised, and more 'objective' [18].

Memory insists on recognising similarities of a given environment. A 'place of memory' is a cultural construct for a particular collective memory [19]. The definition of memory as 'collective' suggests that a single memory is shared by a large and homogenous community. Based on Assmann's interpretation of collective memory, individuals possess various identities according to the various groups, communities, belief systems, political systems, etc. to which they belong, and equally multifarious are their communicative cultural identities [20]. The identity evokes a stock of memories harboured by an individual or a community, while not allowing for the complexity and instability of symbolic attachments within any society [19].

As visual elements of an urban environment, traditional colours reinforce cultural memory [15]. The local colour is related to the shared memory of a group of people. Colour as a strong visual element plays the role of enhancing urban imaginary and evoking city memories. The collective memory of local colour has its roots in the psychological relationship between belief and knowledge, through the causal truth-maker principle [21]. External colour elements through perception generate beliefs about the local environment, which are transformed into knowledge, and this is manifested as part of identity.

Our memory exists in constant interaction not only with other human memories, but also with 'things' and outward symbols [20]. Thus, we can understand that colour memory is associated with a particular place and generates the symbolic meaning of colour. Every culture conceives colour in accordance with its own natural environment, its own climate, its own history, its own knowledge and its own traditions [22].

Nas et al. comment that the symbolic structure of a city is of great importance for its identity [23]. The colourscape in urban environment provides rich and complex colour symbols, which may often have different meanings depending on context and cultural setting. Many researchers [9, 24-26] believe that cultural dimensions generate colour and symbolic meaning.

Strong and stable cultures require things to stay in their appointed place. Symbolic boundaries keep the categories 'pure', giving cultures their unique meaning and identity [27]. Façade colour, for example, is an effective means of sustaining a consistent and distinctive visual experience of a street scene (see Figure 4). The city is 'the locus of collective memory' [28], and colour identity, in the cityscape sense, is a unique configuration of all the objects that go to make up the city, both natural and man-made [26]. Thus colour, as a maker of meaning, plays an active role in the process of understanding local culture.

Figure 4: Street scene with house façades on Belgrave Road, Leicester, UK (Photos: Xu, 2017).

Insider and outsider perspectives

Local environments are experienced by the many different people who live in them. Thus urban spaces have to be interpreted from multiple viewpoints, none of which is more authoritative, or more correct, than any other [29]. A unity of identity is a dialectical synthesis of internal and external definition [12]. It points out that one of the most important characteristics of identity is that it is also defined by its differences.

Referring to the definition of cultural identity, the insider creates 'self-image' and expresses beliefs based on his or her own cultural value. On the other hand, the image perceived by an outsider is called 'public-image', which is interpreted through the eyes and cultural preferences of the public [30]. Some local colours may not be fully decoded and understood due to the differences of cultural background. An acceptable identity must be an integration of self-image and public-image. Lynch explains that public images are areas of agreement which might be expected to appear through the interaction of a single physical reality, a common culture, and a basic nature [16]. Thus, at least two sorts of meaning occur in the concept of identity: self-identified and the meaning defined by others (Figure 5).
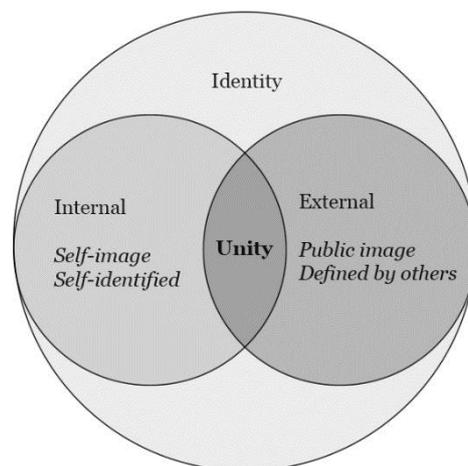

Figure 5: Integration of identity.

In terms of meaning, collective preference for colour should be negotiated with different people, such as inhabitants, tourists, visitors and professionals. Wenger says that identity formation is a dual process, which includes identification and negotiation [31]. Identification is the process through which modes of belonging become constituents of identities by creating distinctive bonds. Negotiation allows us to make meanings applicable to new circumstances, to enlist the collaboration of others, to make sense of events, and to assert our membership [31].

In this sense, an identity can be understood as a mediation between the self-identified and that defined by others. The self-identity and internally persistent sameness must be compared and differentiated from externals. Identity is always constructed for a particular point of view. Relph provides the perspectives of insiderness and outsiderness on identity, and distinguishes the cultural group based on notions of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' [32]. The inside-outside division is a basic dualism that is essential to the experience of identity (Table 1).

To use the notion of insider and outsider, urban spaces can only be interpreted from a variety of viewpoints due to different habitants [29]. The interpretation of colour by the insider may differ from that of the outsider, because from semiotic perspective, the referent of colour interpretation is very likely different in the sociocultural dimension. In a metropolis like London or New York, immigrants

and tourists have a large impact on the local society. Inhabitants of these capital cities are more influenced by the global culture, which determines the classification of viewpoints it needs from both inside and outside perspectives.

Types of insiders and outsiders	Interpretation of insiders and outsiders
Vicarious insiders	who artistically attach to the place
Behavioural insiders	who see physical appearance of place
Empathetic insiders	who decode symbolic meaning of place
Existential insiders	who is local inhabitant of this place
Incidental outsiders	who visit the place with certain purpose
Objective outsiders	who is professional working with the place
Existential outsiders	who is local inhabitant but does not feel belonging

Table 1: Interpretation of Relph's insiders and outsiders.

In addition, the various types of identity are not discrete, nor are they mutually exclusive or unchanging [32]. Thus Relph's framework considers more perspectives to interpret and understand the identity of place. The specific meaning of local colour has been reconstructed in a changing cultural condition. The task is to integrate and develop these traditional qualities into new modes of research and collaboration, working toward transformation without sacrificing empathy and depth of understanding [33].

Globalisation and locality

As a result of globalisation, the homogeneity of urban environments everywhere challenges the heterogeneity of local authority. The influence of globalisation on culture has given rise to concerns related to its impact on local cultures, with the attendant risks of homogenisation and commodification [28]. Bernard quotes Robertson and points out that most theorists present globalisation in terms of identity, as the route through which the world becomes a 'single place' [34]. When more and more cities appear to be the 'same place', the local identity seems to be imperative in resisting the transformation.

Many countries now focus on the preservation and conservation, and even the development, of local identity in terms of sustainable competitiveness. With this objective, the chromatic character of the city is approached with great responsibility, referring to colour both in the urbanscape and architecture [35]. The local, then, may be seen as a source of difference of cultural identities, examples of which globalisation cannot entirely eradicate. The argument of homogeneity vs heterogeneity in urban environments under the impact of globalisation is that globalisation in some way disturbs the idea of 'culture'. For Barnard in postmodernism the reference shifts to another signifier and another cultural code from the modern to a postmodern world [34].

Taylor suggests that there is no such thing as a single city operating on its own [36]. A global network connects centres with different intensity and scale whereby regional and local centres within countries become integrated at the global level [37]. The homogeneous urban environment in a global scale can be seen as the consequence of globalisation, in which the oneness and sameness is the

inevitable identity of postmodernism. On the contrary, the heterogeneity of locality disguises a differentiation representing its own character as a local identity.

The viewpoint of local identity in network thinking cannot be isolated; it requires analysis in both macro and micro scales. For example, the red bus and red telephone box are both considered to be parts of the identity of London at a local scale (see Fig. 6). Then, extrapolated to a national scale, it may be interpreted as part of the identity of England. The local colours of Italy may likewise represent part of the heritage of European culture. Globalisation and accessibility greatly expand the 'audience size' more than ever, and thus a multitude of local identities together contribute to a global network. Massey comments that all we need is 'a global sense of the local' [38]. In order to identify the local colour identity, we need to be able to locate it on an integrated scale, which connects the global and local in a positive way.

Figure 6: Red buses and telephone boxes of London (Photos: Xu, 2015).

Local character plays a decisive role in giving a settlement its particular identity. Urban gathering may be understood as an interpretation of the genius loci, in accordance with the values and needs of the actual society [2]. The spirit of place can persist in spite of profound changes in the basic components of identity [32].

One place can be differentiated from another by use of unique or contrasting colours. As Faulkner suggests, the most common function of colour is for identification or classification, to associate objects of the same kind [39]. Colour is thus a key feature in people's experience of a place. As a distinctive visual component of urban heritage, colour is integral to creating and shaping the cultural identities of cities [28].

Epilogue

It is impossible to include all the relevant theories and writings in this short essay, however the key issues have been presented in considering colour as a way to shape the identity of place. These theories from different disciplines may not be necessary to compose an underlying structure or a concrete solution. At least the interdisciplinary perspectives provide a variety of viewpoints and support the idea that colour design has strong potential to contribute to the identity of place.

The different perspectives could be listed as: Physical, Cultural, Social, Psychological, Anthropological, Historical, Geographical, Environmental, Aesthetical, Perceptual, Economical, Political, Art and Design. This long list could be further extended in the future. As always, colour is not an issue within a single perspective, but rather many factors must be considered in order to understand colour fully.

One point that should be emphasised is from these notes there emerges a significant concern on colour in relation to culture. Even from physical aspect, the materiality of local colour not only shows the resources of colour but in turn also leads to formation of a local material culture and visual identity. Indeed culture is a force to make colour different and bring about a distinctive identity of place. It raises the question of how to embed colour into cultural study as a discipline for understanding the meaning of local colour.

Studies of colour and culture have long been established as interpretive areas of colour research [24]. And yet colour culture interweaves colour research and cultural study as a disciplinary approach to provide particular knowledge of colour meaning and value. Such a study of colour culture would focus on professional practitioners who develop their interpretation of colour in a particular cultural context. Most importantly the field of colour culture calls for an interdisciplinary approach from different fields. These notes can thus be seen as a theoretical groundwork for further research.

References

1. Caivano J and López M (2007), Chromatic identity in global and local markets: analysis of colours in branding, *Colour: Design & Creativity*, **1** (3), 1-14.

2. Norberg-Schulz C (1980), *Genius Loci: Towards A Phenomenology of Architecture*, Academy Editions, London.

3. Montgomery R (1989), Architecture invents new people, in *Architect's People*, Ellis R and Cuff D (eds.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 260-281.

4. Pylyshyn Z (2007), *Things and Places: How the Mind Connects with the World*, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

5. Young D (2013), The colours of things, in *Handbook of Material Culture*, Tilley C, Keane W, Küchler S, Rowlands M and Spyer P (eds.), London: SAGE, 173-185.

6. Lancaster M (1996), *Colourscape*, London: Academy Editions.

7. de Heer J (2009), *The Architectonic Colour: Polychromy in the Purist architecture of Le Corbusier*, Hall G (trans.), Rotterdam: 010 Publishers.

8. Green-Armytage P (2009), Colours: regulation and ownership, *Colour: Design & Creativity*, **4** (6), 1-22.

9. Lenclos J and Lenclos D (2004), *Colors of the World: The Geography of Color*, Bauhn G (trans.), New York: Norton.

10. Porter T (1982), *Colour Outside*, London: The Architectural Press.

11. Parekh B (2000), *Report of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*, London: Profile Books.

12. Jenkins R (1996), *Social Identity*, London: Routledge.

13. Lidwell W, Holden K and Butler J (2003), *Universal Principles of Design*, Gloucester: Rockport Publishers.

14. Holmes J (1993), *John Bowlby and Attachment Theory*, London: Routledge.

15. Unver R and Ozturk D (2002), An example of façade colour design of mass housing, *Colour Research and Application*, **27** (4), 291-299.

16. Lynch K (1960), *The Image of the City*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

17. Tomić D and Marić I (2011), Colour in the city: principles of nature-climate characteristics, *Architecture and Civil Engineering*, **9** (2), 315-323*.*

18. Halbwachs M (1999), cited in *Cultural Memory and the Construction of Identity*, Ben-Amos D and Weissberg L (eds.), Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 15.

19. Carrier P (2000), Places, politics and the archiving of contemporary memory in Pierre Nora's Les Lieux de mémoire, in *Memory and Methodology*, Radstone S (ed.), Oxford: Berg.

20. Assmann J (2008), Communicative and cultural memory, in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Erll A and Nünning A (eds.), Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 109-118.

21. Le Poidevin R (2007), *The Images of Time: An Essay on Temporal Representation*, New York: Oxford University Press.

22. Pastoureau M (2012), *The Colour of Our Memories*, Lloyd J (trans.), Cambridge: Polity Press.

23. Nas P, de Groot M and Schut M (2011), Introduction: variety of symbols, in *Cities Full of Symbols: A Theory of Urban Space and Culture*, Nas P (ed.), Amsterdam: Leiden University Press. 7-26.

24. Gage J (1999), *Color and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

25. Arnkil H (2013), *Colour in the Visual World*, Helsinki: Aalto University Publication.

26. Doran S (2013), *The Culture of Yellow: Or, The Visual Politics of Late Modernity*, London: Bloomsbury Academic.

27. Hall S (1997), The spectacle of the 'other', in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Hall S (ed.), London: SAGE, 233-290*.*

28. UNESO (2016), *Culture Urban Future: Global Report on Culture for Sustainable Urban Development*, Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.

29. Zukin S (1995), *The Cultures of Cities*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

30. Hall S (1990), Cultural identity and diaspora, in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference,* Rutherford J (ed.), London: Lawrence & Wishart, 222-237.

31. Wenger E (1998), *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

32. Relph E (1976), *Place and Placelessness*, London: Pion.

33. Otto T and Smith R (2013), Design anthropology: a distinct style of knowing, in *Design Anthropology: Theory and Practice,* Gunn W, Otto T and Smith R (eds.), London: Bloomsbury, 1-32.

34. Barnard M (2005), *Graphic Design as Communication*, New York: Routledge.

35. Neill W (2004), *Urban Planning and Cultural Identity*, London: Routledge.

36. Taylor P (2004), *World City Network: A Global Urban Analysis*, London: Routledge.

37. Castells M (1996), *The Rise of the Network Society*, Chichester: John Wiley*.*

38. Massey D (1993), Power-geometry and a progressive sense of place, in *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*, Bird J, Curtis B, Putnam T, Robertson G and Tickner L (eds.), London: Routledge, 60-70.

39. Faulkner W (1972), *Architecture and Colour*, London: John Wiley.