The Potential of Iconography as A Method in the Development of
A New Garden Identity

Mina Kaboudarahangi, Osman M Tahir and Mustafa Kamal M.S,
Department of Landscape Architecture, Faculty of Design and Architecture,
Universiti Putra Malaysia.

Abstract: Garden design has been described as a category of fine arts and, it has a long time
interrelationship with the art of painting. Gardens can be defined as works of art due to their artistic
values. Therefore, like other artifacts, they can be studied and recognized by their specific icons.
Numerous famous historical gardens in the world are recognized through their individual icons.
However, newly developing gardens do not yet posses any icons that represent them. Nevertheless,
these new gardens should be developed, recognized and identified through their particular icons, to
exhibit their exclusive identities. Hence, this paper will discuss the definitions of iconography and
identity, and dealing with the garden identity. It will also argue the potential of iconography as a
symbolic imagery method for creation of new garden identities. This approach aims to contribute the
knowledge of iconography as a methodology for study of garden icons, and formulate an iconographic
framework for creating new garden identities based on specific cultures and needs of the people.

Key words: garden, garden identity, iconography.

INTRODUCTION

Cultures are products of traditions throughout history. They provide conditions for development of
identities. Identity consists of cultural constructs and emerges during the life course. In fact, it is related to
rituals, meanings, customs, behaviors, social and historical events, which influenced by the life story and the
value system of the people over the time. However, culture affects on people’s general understanding of
physical environments, and how to deal with it. Thus, landscape features provide a channel for a relationship
between people and nature. They convey special symbolism and meanings, which establish specific identity and
have rooted in the culture of the people (Easthope 1999; Hermanowicz and Morgan, 1999; Lappegard, 2006;
Peace, Kellaher and Holland, 2006; Stewart, Liebert and Larkin, 2004).

Consequently, development of landscape identity is a basis for the development of an identity. It figures
out the image of specific people, and it could be a vision for the development of community identity. Garden
plays a significant role in landscape imagery. It is located in landscape, and reveals both aesthetic value and
material in landscape. Hence, garden identity is considered as an aspect of social identity, and could contribute
to development of national landscape identity (Clayton, 2007; Connell, 2004; Gilbert, 2005; Waymark, 2003).

Garden design as a category of fine arts has a long-lasting interrelation with the art of painting (Ross, 1998).
Ross has considered this art, as noble as arts of painting and poetry in the eighteenth century, in England.
Meanwhile, from the past, garden design has been associated with the other branches of art such as poetry,
calligraphy and design. For instance, Khansari, Moghtader and Yavari (2004) mentioned that a Persian garden
has an interaction with the Persian arts of painting, poetry and carpet design. Moreover, according to Engle
(1986) the relationship between the arts of painting, poetry and calligraphy is one of the most important aspects
of creating Chinese gardens. As a result, one can recognize a garden by the elements from such works of art.
However, Thacker (1979) suggested that well-known traditional gardens have been recognizable and
identifiable via their specific images or icons throughout history. This means that gardens, like other forms of
fine arts, can be studied and recognized through their detailed images or icons.

Even though, famous historic gardens of the world can be identified and recognized through their particular
images, this does not seem to be the case with newly emerging gardens. These gardens lack the images and
icons of more established gardens like the Persian, Chinese or Japanese gardens. Nevertheless, they still require
the development of certain significant images leading to the formation of their iconography and identities. This
selected iconography should be in form, quality and appearance, which reflect the needs, beliefs, philosophy,
history and culture of the people associated with the gardens.

Definition of Iconography, Identity and Garden:
The following definitions are presented to assist the understanding of how iconography can be used to
determine garden identity, and subsequently propose a framework for creating new garden’s identities.
Iconography:

Icon is a visual element that is identifiably associated with its meaning and is shared commonly in public places for certain purposes (Kohsaka and Flitner, 2004; Rose, 2002). It acts as a device and can take the form of sculpture, painting, preserved artifact or building. According to Hopkins (1990), as cited in Wai (2006), icons communicate with human beings by creating links between real spaces and imaginary ones. In addition, Daniels (2007) highlighted that they are parts of social and political history, and they represent a sense of continuity and cultural unity of people. An icon communicates meaning beyond its specific context. Consequently, philosophical and cultural principles and beliefs lie behind icons (Page, 1992). Overall, icons attempt to clarify characteristics of cultural features. They are spatial metaphors for objects or places, and give rise to the formation of belief system and identity.

The word iconography derives from two Greek words, eikon and graphein, which are translated as “image” and “writing”. Therefore, it could be literally translated as “image writing” or “image describing” (Straten, 1994). According to the American Heritage Dictionary (2008), iconography is the representation or set of representations of a person, place or thing, as a picture or an album of pictures, also the iconography is a pictorial illustration of a subject. Princeton University (2006) has described the iconography as an image or a symbolic representation that is traditionally associated with a person or a subject. Moreover, Wages (1999) defined iconography as the “…visual expression of the idea in a text”. Based on the above-mentioned definitions, it could be said that iconography is the image or images that can describe symbolic and traditional heritage of a place.

Symbols embody major characteristics of ambitions and belief systems of cultures. Lowenthal in Daniels & Cosgrove, (2007) claimed that iconography could explain the condition of a landscape as a cultural image. Therefore, it is a pictorial approach to represent structure and symbolizes the environment. Hence, the iconography can be used to describe landscapes. In the other word, iconography can also refer to a methodology for studying landscape as a cultural image. It is a direct or an indirect search for the meaning of the represented subject (Bialostocki as cited in Sternberg, 1977). Page (1992) argued that iconography has been developed as a way of analyzing symbolic implications in a wider cultural context. In his opinion, symbols include significant indicators of the aspirations and belief systems of cultures. As such, they represent essential tools in any analysis of the past and contemporary attitudes towards science, technology and future. Straten (1994), established a theory of which iconography is a method to study the history and theory of symbolic imagery. This theory further refined by Panofsky (1955) who suggested the iconography as a text that can be read.

Place Identity:

Identity has diverse definitions depending on different contexts or viewpoints, and it is a word with uncertain limitations. The process of shaping identity acts upon several principles of the culture (Lappegard, 2006). Furthermore, identity can be an expression of heritages, which celebrate both nature and culture of the people (Stewart, Liebert & Larkin, 2004). Therefore, it needs to be reflected in a place to be learnt and experienced by others. Meanwhile, the identity of a place is the special character of that place which distinguishes it from other places while reflecting its ethnic origins and heritage (Watson & Bentley, 2007). Thus, place identity, in this context refers to the garden identity, is defined as the individuality of a place including its character, symbol, image and icon that has roots in popular culture.

Garden:

Miller (1993) defines garden as excess of form, an imaginative and immovable feature of people’s art. Ross (1998) believes that gardens provide pleasure, beauty, respite and reflection. In addition, they engage the imagination as well as delighting the emotions and feelings. Olonetzky (2007) suggested that garden conveys the personality of the person who has created it. A garden is established through symbols, meanings and practices which are based on culture as well as social relationships (Escobar, 2001; Stephenson, 2008). Therefore, the study of gardens is actually concerned with an exclusive understanding of human culture and activities as well as an understanding of their distinctive interactions with nature. In this relation, it could be agreed that a garden can be defined as an artistically designed place, indicating specific icons, emerging from culture and being influenced by particular social relationships.

Garden and Garden Identity:

In the past, garden was been adopted as a symbol of national identity (Helmreich, 2002). Each culture endows gardens with forms that in return contribute meaning and identity to gardens. A garden is not just estimated, through its physical manifestation. The value of a garden is also built upon its represented form, medium of exchange, sites of visual appropriation and its focus on the formation of identity. Helmreich (2002) claimed that a sense of communal identity could be supported via garden development. Therefore, gardens are important for a nation to enhance its history, common goal and achievements.
Gardens are not just concrete man-made artifacts. They are interwoven in real forms, which hold both past and present. They have been shaped throughout past events, beliefs, needs and the culture of people who have created them. Hence, history and culture have had a great impact on formation and evolution of garden identity. In this relation, garden identity could be defined as a characteristic by which a particular garden is differentiated from other gardens.

According to the aforementioned definition, the garden is an artistically designed place with specific icons and images that conveys individuality, history and culture of a society. This art has rooted in past events, traditions, beliefs and needs of the people who have created it. Therefore, in studying existing garden identities, it is essential to look at those specific icons and images to interpret them and understand the meanings and philosophies, which underlie them. Obviously, these meanings and philosophies had shaped through past events, religions, beliefs, needs and culture of the people. Therefore, a method can be suggested which studies and interprets artistic phenomena, paying attention to the history and philosophy in creating or determining a new garden identity as a symbol of national identity. Thus, iconography can be applied as a method for studying direct or indirect meaning of a subject to formulate a framework for creating the identity of a new garden.

Iconography and the Development of an Identity:

Iconographic method was developed in order to identify and interpret the meaning of symbols within their wider cultural context. It is a fundamental tool in any analysis of past and contemporary attitudes towards science, technology and the future (Daniels and Cosgrove, 2007; Page, 1992). In fact, the iconographic method is an artistic and historical method. It interprets levels of meaning in human artifacts covering painting, poetry, and literature in addition to landscape design (Straten, 1994). Cosgrove and Daniels further argued that iconographic study requires investigation of meaning in a work of art by understanding its historical context and the analysis of the ideas implicated in its imagery (Daniels & Cosgrove, 2007). Panofsky (1955) suggested three phases in an iconographic approach. It was based on Straten’s findings in 1994, and it later refined by Daniels and Cosgrove. They established the three phases of iconographic approach as follow:

a. The first stage is the pre-iconographical description and it takes place when an image is been observed for the first time. A mental image of everything that the image portrays is automatically being created without defining the relationship between things. During the pre-iconographic observation, the stylistic aspects of the visual arts are often ignored although they are fundamental for the complete understanding and explanation of an image.

b. The second stage is the most important stage in iconography. It is the iconographical descriptions which manifest the subject of specific image.

c. The third stage is termed as iconographical interpretation. The purpose of this part is to ask whether the represented images convey an underlying significance that could be interpreted within philosophy or history. An affirmative response will lead to the task of unraveling its significance.

Osborne (2007) employed this method in his research on Canadian national iconography. He was looking for the development of a unique iconographic system in his study of artistic images of Canadian lands and people. He argued that images can play an imperative role in the development of Canadian iconography and pointed to an integral relationship between images with their spirituality and materiality. In his opinion, block images, forms, or line drawings could also compose a pictography of sacred communications, spiritual identity, or history of cosmological events. He concluded that old buildings, early architecture, tools, vehicles, weapons and contemporary pictures of people clothing as well as places and events must be examined to fill out the national iconography. In addition, popular historical novels, village dances and other traditional activities as a part of national identity await further inspection (Osborne, 2007).

In another study, Kucan (1999) offered ideas and guidelines for developing identity concerning with iconography. She argued that specific national space emerges as representative of the whole and it often appears as a symbolic place. Hence, an image affects on public relationship with certain space. Consequently, she
finalized that iconography is a method for identifying specific characteristics of a place and icons, which are brought together, establish a place identity.

In further iconographic study, Prince (2007) argued that a picture could present people’s emotions and their relationships. In his study, he interpreted the painting by Thomas Gainsborough that pointed to the sense of satisfaction and ownership of a young couple in the painting. He argued that the method of studying paintings could also provide a vast view about the culture of people and their lifestyle. In addition, Terkenli (2005) believed that pictures could present rural landscapes and traditional view of living and working. It concludes that these perceived forms and visual elements of landscape are related to iconological qualities and can assist identification of an iconography for specific landscape.

According to the above examples, iconography can be employed as a method in creating, developing or identifying an icon or identity. In the first example, many factors were considered for the development of a national iconography. As such, old photos and instruments of the past, public beliefs, spirituality and clothing were engaged to identify an identity via iconography. In the second example, attention was given to a unique characteristic of place by specific focus on particular icons. Finally, in the third study, the culture of people and to traditional method of living and working were being employed to identify an identity. Hence, cultures, old traditions, beliefs, symbols and religions should be considered in understanding, creating or developing an identity in iconographic method. Accordingly, the iconography as a method could be employed to identify specific characteristic of a garden, which contains particular icons.

**Iconographic Method in Identifying Garden:**

Garden has been considered as a source of meaning and value with long-term association with period, traditions, symbolism, philosophy, art and poetry. It is a controlled nature and a movement from nature to the independent form of art with several levels in perceptions and meanings (Albers, 1991; Brace, 1999; Carroll, 2003; Lehrman, 1980; McIntosh, 2005; Ross, 1998). Artists, architects, anthropologists, archaeologists and environmental historians agree on the analysis of landscape painting and garden design as cultural materials. In fact, a garden mirrors the culture and each culture creates garden forms with specific meanings, which express that culture. Hence, it is critical to understand the cultural context in order to understand the garden (Benes, 1999; Birksted, 2002; Helmreich, 2002; Siciliano, 2005; Waymark, 2003).

Garden as a cultural image is a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolizing environment. It is also concerned with geography, fine arts, literature, social history and anthropology (Daniels & Cosgrove, 2007). Garden features have been created differently among diverse cultures. They link particular needs and religious beliefs, and they have designed to provide for different intentions. For instance, garden design, in the twentieth-century, puts extra emphasis on the importance of wilderness. Moreover, Chinese moon gate, Islamic Talar and different types of enclosing gardens are examples of this category (Birksted, 2002; Ross, 1998; McIntosh, 2005).

As mentioned earlier, garden is a pictorial phenomenon, which concerns people. It is created to represent a cultural image of specific people with long association with their traditions, arts, symbols, beliefs, histories and life course. Hence, the method for understanding and studying gardens should be related to all of the aforementioned items. According to the analysis and above argument, iconography as a method can be employed in the development of an identity. Whereas, iconography is the visual expression of an idea, and it has been used as a verbal and visual method of analyzing Italian villa gardens. The iconographic method is the theoretical and historical study of symbolic imagery that is associated with ethnography and can clarify the meaning of garden images (Benes, 1999; Daniels and Cosgrove, 2007; Page, 1992; Wages, 1999).

Moreover, the iconography can reflect the method of living and culture of the people that are associated with garden identity. Based on the definitions, which have been suggested for garden identity, garden iconography and definition of the garden, the iconographic method and three phases of this approach can be employed in the development of new garden identity.

Garden identities have been established via the culture of people. Specific features, that contribute to make a place recognizable, will enhance the place identity in garden. These specific features, which are rooted in the culture of the local people, become the icons of a garden and form the associated image of the garden. A collection of these specific images makes up the iconography of a garden. Well-known traditional gardens in history such as Chinese and Persian gardens are examples of gardens that already possess their iconography, and hence identity. They can be identified and labeled by their unique and representative images or icons. These icons are different from each other and reflect the cultural backgrounds of their creators. Therefore, a circular inter-relationship between garden identity, garden iconography, people and their specific culture can be suggested as a fundamental framework for the development of new garden identities (Figure 1).
Fig. 1: The inter-relationship between garden identity, garden iconography, people and culture.

This framework is based on the three phases of iconographic approach. It aims to create new garden identities according to the circular inter-relationship. The iconographic method can be applied in study of gardens that already posed their own identities, in order to seek their specific philosophy, needs, beliefs, and culture of the people represented by the garden icons. However, in the development of a new garden identity, the iconographic method can be used in reverse. By studying specific needs, beliefs, and cultures of the people, associated with the development of the garden, we can create new icons for the emerging gardens. Subsequently, the philosophy and meanings, which are located behind these icons, are corresponding to those people and their culture. It concludes that, specific icons and images creating new garden iconography are related to the particular people who create the gardens. Furthermore, these new gardens are recognized and identified through these specific images and icons. As a result, the iconographical method can be employed in establishing a new garden identity.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, garden as a cultural image is an artistic, symbolic and pictorial collection of icons in a designed environment. From an iconographic aspect, these icons are notable for their representation of a garden. Garden iconography should include garden images due to its scenic manifestation of certain icons, figures and symbolic objects. Therefore, garden iconography can be defined as a tool that is associated with art, history and philosophy. It includes a collection of garden images, representing specific icons that project the garden’s identity. Furthermore, it contributes to the formation and creation of an international visual language of a garden, which artistically employed, to express various ideas about the garden.

Due to their artistic values, gardens are works of art, and like other artifacts, they can be studied by their specific images. Iconography as the historical study of symbolic imagery of gardens can be employed to analyze images in the study of garden identity. Hence, gardens can be identified through their specific iconographies according to the three stages of iconographic method. By studying garden iconography, it is possible to identify the icons of new gardens, and formulate an iconographic framework for their identities. This framework will suggest icons, layout and design principles for the development of new garden style based on local culture and history. The knowledge derived from studies of garden iconography will contribute significantly towards the development of a national landscape identity for developing nations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We would like to express our respect and thank to Dr Suhardi Maulan who has had a great influence on us to develop this approach.

REFERENCES


