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Townscape Character through Residents' and Tourists' Perception

This study focused on the city of Shimla, a popular tourist destination in the Himalayas. It examined how tourists and residents view the city's changing townscape character. The study concluded that if Shimla wants to continue to be a viable tourist destination, it must focus all its social, political, and economic forces on protecting its townscape character and natural landscape. Failure to do this will not only erode the city's visual character but will create environmental degradation. Since tourism and the quality of environment are inseparable, tourism planners must link the city's present and future with its past.

Keywords: Indian Tourism, Heritage Tourism, Tourism in Himalayas, Indian Cities, Environmental Perception, and Urban Tourism

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This study examined the aesthetic aspect of townscape character. It analyzed Shimla, a city located in the Himalayas in northern India. In recent years Shimla has grown as a popular tourist destination. There were 50 hotels at the end of the 1970s and in the early 1980s, the number of hotels increased to 75. *The Tribune* reports tremendous growth in Shimla's hotel industry, from 98 in 1990 to 210 in 1998. In the early 1990s the annual tourist arrival was 500,000 and by the late 1990s, this number almost doubled to 900,000 (Singh 2000). Both residents and tourists fear however that the city is losing its visual character (Kanwar 1997, Lohumi 1999). The aesthetic quality of a townscape and landscape is an important aspect of the urban and natural environment. Since this is what attracts tourists, it needs to be managed properly (Krippendorf 1997).

The objective of this study is to examine how residents and tourists perceived the townscape character and developmental practices of Shimla. Eighty residents and eighty tourists were randomly chosen and interviewed face-to-face in Shimla. They were questioned about the city's townscape character. To remind them of the increased building activity in the city, both these groups were shown fifty photographs of the new building development. Residents and tourists were asked a number of questions, which included: how well the new buildings suited the landscape; how well the new buildings fitted in with surrounding buildings in terms of appearance; how well the new buildings fitted in with surrounding buildings in terms scale; and how well the new buildings fitted in with surrounding buildings in terms of building materials. They were asked to rate these questions on 1 to 7 scale where 1 represented inappropriate and 7, highly appropriate.

Data was then aggregated on binary matrices for both groups. The columns represented the townscape criteria and rows, the participants (residents or tourists) ratings. Arithmetic means of participants' ratings for each criterion were calculated and summarized in table 1. The overall mean rating of the townscape criteria represents the townscape character as perceived by the residents and tourists.

Table 1: Assessment of Townscape Character: Residents' and Tourists' Samples Size of 80.

	Townscape Criteria	Residents' Sample Mean	Tourists' Sample Mean	Calculate z value
1.	Relationship between new buildings and the landscape.	2.8	3.2	1.76
2.	Relationship between new buildings with surrounding buildings in terms of appearance.	3.2	4.1	1.8
3.	Relationship between new buildings with surrounding buildings in terms scale.	3.0	4.4	1.64
4.	Relationship between new buildings with surrounding buildings in terms of building material	3.4	3.9	1.69
	Overall Mean Ratings of Townscape Criteria	3.1	3.9	1.88

**Z tests at $\alpha = .05$ significance level (2 tail)*

To study the significant difference between the perception of both groups, the mean ratings and overall mean ratings of both residents and tourists were run through the z test for two independent groups. The null hypothesis for each criterion which states that there was no significant difference between the mean ratings of residents (n =80) and tourists (n = 80) failed to be rejected at $\alpha = .05$ significance level. This shows that there were no significant differences between the perception of both groups. There is no doubt that mean rating for the residents were found to be lower than that of tourists. This shows that residents were more dissatisfied with the new buildings and land development schemes as compared to the tourists. However, both these resulting mean ratings were below the middle value of 4 on the measurement scale of perception on a seven point scale where 1 represented inappropriate and 7, highly appropriate. These ratings reflect that both the groups noticed a deterioration of Shimla's townscape character.

The lower overall rating of residents also reflected their greater familiarity with inappropriate building activities throughout Shimla. Many residents expressed concern about the safety of inappropriate concrete construction which has escalated in the last decade. They also pinpointed that the mountain slopes which were previously considered inappropriate for development were now being exploited for multistory concrete buildings. This type of heavy construction has become a norm despite high costs and the hazards of landslides caused by deforestation and soil erosion.

Eighty five percent of the residents were concerned about the inappropriate pattern of recent development which was described as characterless and an eyesore. Residents who were born and raised in the city were also very nostalgic for the colonial character and cleanliness of the old Shimla. They referred to the 1960s and 1970s as the "good old days." Residents also

reported about the changing face of the city center due to the construction of a number of concrete buildings which do not lend to the local character of the older existing buildings. New buildings are not sympathetically linked with the existing streetscape. Many of the old colonial buildings have been consumed by fire and residents complained that the remaining ones are not properly maintained (Jutla 2000). Shimla which has become very congested and over crowded over the past twenty years is turning into a 'concrete jungle,' far from its original natural environment. Only fifteen percent of the residents thought that the change was positive since it brought cable TV, cellular phones, increase in public transportation, and private auto ownership.

The higher overall rating of tourists reflected their greater acquaintance was with only the popular tourist activity areas which are generally well kept and maintained. Eighty percent of the tourists thought that the change was negative. The tourists who visited Shimla in 1970s and early 1980s romanticized the old image of Shimla. Twenty percent of tourists stated that the change was positive because of better train travel facilities, quality of hotels and taxi service. The majority of both residents and tourists agreed that the new development is not visually pleasing and lacks creativity. It is also inappropriate in terms of building material, scale, and style. They indicated a strong preference for more traditional building styles. The two groups also indicated that there are no strict design guidelines and legal framework to guide new development. It was also pointed out that the development approval process was unfair and corrupted. According to Sharma (2000a), many areas in the vicinity are not covered under the Town and Country Planning Act and the local officials are not armed with effective land use laws. Both residents and tourists believed that there is an urgent need to control new development and work out design guidelines and solutions to preserve the existing character of Shimla.

This research highlights the need to maintain and enhance the visual character of townscapes. The study recommends that cities which draw tourists should be developed in the context of their history, architectural heritage, and landscape character. Visually attractive cities not only bring civic pride to its residents but also attract tourists and increase economic activity. For Shimla to continue as a viable, attractive, and promising tourist destination, tourism planners must pay attention to the preservation and protection of its natural and cultural landscape.

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