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Perceiving Place: A Social Design Case Study

Mary Anne Brinkman

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Perceiving Place:
A Social Design Case Study

Honors Thesis
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April 2019
Abstract

Space is one of the most basic foundational systems for living things. No matter what happens in the world, it happens in a spatial setting. The specific design of that setting or place plays a large role in the lives of those within it. Other factors within place—factors that might inform design choices—also affect perception of place. Broad consensus exists in scholarly literature about the general role that history, culture, environment and social factors play into the perception of place. Past studies have supported that our perception of reality before actually observing it, actively affects the reality we then observe. In other words, certain factors constantly influence the way in which we process information and interpret space. However, a confirmatory analysis of this model, especially in regards to the specific categories influencing perception, has yet to be conducted.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to expand upon and further explore the notion of such categories in space analysis and neighborhood design. I am looking to find if the application of this method will reveal varying differences in internal and external perceptions, and the level to which they may or may not vary. I am interested in further exploring the ways in which such knowledge can then lend itself to the creation of more informed and effective neighborhood-based design, especially centered on bridging potential gaps in understandings of place within Dayton, Ohio. It is hoped that this research will educate designers, urban planners, and community leaders, in addition to the broader public as to what is affecting the spaces they are functioning within and their personal perceptions towards location. Success with this approach will provide a powerful social model for advancing communication across various levels of perception, as well as cultures and languages.

Dedication or Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the many people that were supportive in my research over the past two years and in writing this paper. I would like to thank Professor Misty Thomas-Trout, the University of Dayton Honors Program, Dr. Patrick F. Palermo, the Berry Family, the Berry Foundation, the University of Dayton Art Department, New Hope Parish and Art Studio, all who were interviewed, and Kathy and Mark Brinkman. Additional thanks to Dr. Nancy Miller, Maria Burkett and Bro. Raymond Fitz for their constant excitement, passion, and guidance.
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1. Introduction

Locations, or the separation of distinct areas, are defined by a multitude of factors. People are conditioned to think about a particular place through the association of these factors. Edward McMahon writes, “A sense of place is a unique collection of qualities and characteristics—visual, cultural, social, and environmental—that provide meaning to location. Sense of place is what makes one city or town different from another and what makes our physical surroundings worth caring about.” Although internally engrained within us and a function of our everyday life, perception of place is not common knowledge or even widely studied within academia. As McMahon discusses, these qualities—history, culture, environment and social make-up—are at the heart of every space’s pattern language, or the unique visual and environmental language engrained in physical place. Thus, in recognizing the sheer diversity of neighborhoods across the United States, but more specifically within Dayton, Ohio, we begin to recognize the importance of designing for these pattern languages in the realm of urban life, especially in light of the intersection of diversity.

According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, it is estimated that by 2050 about 68% of the world’s population will be living in urban areas. This is an additional 2.5 billion people that will be moving from rural to urban spaces in the next 30 years. Understanding the differences in spaces and neighborhoods is becoming increasingly essential for city builders and leaders. However, there is increasing tension when varying demographics move into spaces of rather consistent homogeneity, especially as we have developed whole systems that maximize profits through homogeneity. Author Emily Talen notes that, “global distribution, financial markets and lending institutions [have] structured themselves around homogenous clustering and centralized notions of cultural authority.” Thus, there is mounting need for social institutions and spaces to break down barriers in spatial integration—a process rooted in both individual and group perceptions and interpretations of space. This can be done during the design process of these spaces and through the modification and analysis of spatial perceptions—the goal of this project.

2. Research Phases

This research has been developed through three main phases: (1) understanding perception, (2) developing Twin Towers narrative, and (3) designing for diversity. The first phase, understanding perception, consisted of a review of literature around general
perception, as well as an in-depth study of the specific effects of history, culture, environment, and social make-up on perception. The second phase, developing Twin Towers narrative, was based on the findings of the first and took the form of various interviews within the chosen neighborhood. These interviews were turned into narratives, analyzed, and broken down in order to identify the various perceptions of the Twin Towers neighborhood and the specific elements of history, culture, environment, and social make-up at their foundation. Creating an informed neighborhood design proposal based off of these findings was the last and final phase of research. This proposal, as discussed later, works to bridge the differences found in internal and external perceptions of Twin Towers. Each of these phases is discussed in detail below.

3. Phase 1: Understanding Perception

General Perception

Perception can be defined as the way in which one interprets the data around them or recognizes and organizes sensory stimuli. Interpretation of this data varies by situation and is determined by the level of influence of the four categories discussed below. While similar perceptions can often bring groups together, and in relation to space, foster neighborhood investment or pride, radically different perceptions can increase tensions and confusion among people and spaces, leading to limited sharing and micro-communities within neighborhoods.

History and Perception

Our perceptions of reality today are combined with evidence from the past. Therefore, every space we function in has its own unique history. This history greatly affects the ways in which one connects with space. This project discusses three elements of history that impact perceptions of place and that can be clearly identified within the neighborhood analyzed later: the functioning of historical tradition, perceptual constancy, and historical preservation.

Past events constantly shape present understandings of space due to different historical traditions which result in diverse realizations of the same space. For example, a person who has lived in one place their whole life will see that space radically different from someone who has just moved into the same neighborhood. Both are presented with the same reality of space or the same initial data; however, the latter figure lacks the historical context of the first, shifting where they place value within the space. Additionally, while humans have their own individual memories that do not overlap and may even contradict, many spaces (neighborhoods in particular) have a collective sense of shared past which is rooted in history. This shared or unshared past functions at a communal level, often manifesting itself through social structures and occasionally in perceptual constancy. The general functioning of history within space can also lend itself to environmental comparison, prompting those experiencing the space to compare the observed setting to elements of another distinct location.
Perceptual constancy is based on the realization that humans have a tendency to perceive the make-up of a place and associated objects within it as relatively stable and unchanging, despite possible changes in the imagery and data received. Therefore, even if a neighborhood radically shifts over a short period of time, whether that may be in social make-up or environmental design, it will often maintain a consistent reputation or perceptions. New traits that arise in these spaces, despite being contradictory of initial traits observed, will often be ignored by the viewer. The edited or changed space will be perceived in line with popular opinions or based on historical statuses. Therefore, in order to create effective design, it is necessary for the designer to understand that this constancy exists, the level in which it functions, and the ways such structures can be approached, especially in working to change neighborhood reputation.

Lastly, in order to address the active role and influence of history in perception of place, one can study an area’s historical preservation. Historical preservation “encompasses the range of strategies by which historic structures are maintained, manipulated, and managed.” In working to understand how history affects perception, it is crucial to look at how a place either harnesses or lacks historical preservation. Such preservation provides tangible evidence of the past and builds on possible shared memory. Many people regard historical preservation as something that exists solely in the recognizable structures of space: churches, buildings, and homes. However, historical preservation can also be developed and maintained through oral stories and long-lasting neighborhood markers. In diverse neighborhoods, not all community members may recognize physical structures as valuable based on culture. In this case, additional elements of history may be needed to attach to, such as neighborhood identifiers. In this research, history was one of the most influential factors of perceptions towards Twin Towers, if not the most influential.

Culture and Perception

“Even when small fragments of culture are elevated to awareness, they are difficult to change, not only because they are so personally experienced but because people cannot act or interact at all in any meaningful way except through the medium of culture.” Our perceptions and thought processes are not independent of the cultural environment we exist in. While culture affects our outward behavior, such as eating habits and actions, it also influences our internal processing, brain function, and ways in which memory is recalled or presented to others.

While it is easy to grasp how culture can shift interactions within a space, especially on an individual level, understanding how larger communal cultures shift interpretation of space is more complex. A recent study of Eastern Asians and Westerners suggests that culture actively affects the way people view the world. This effect is not so much seen in structural changes, but rather at the level of perception. Instead of culture changing the data presented, culture actually affects how people respond to the data that they are perceiving. The study found that Eastern Asian cultures are more interdependent and individually spend more time monitoring their environment in relation to others, while Westerners focus on the individual and central objects as these cultures tend to be more
independent and focused on self rather than others. Similarly, significant evidence has been found that people who are brought up in different cultures live in different perceptual worlds. “This can be found in their manner of orienting themselves in space, how they get around and move from one place to the next.”

Much of this cultural perception occurs in a three-step process: selection, organization, and interpretation. Although presented with the same initial data, different cultures will select different information to process first. As mentioned above, Westerners found themselves paying more attention to the individual elements of space, while Eastern Asians focused on the environment in relation to something else. The second step in cultural perception is organization. In other words, how do people group things within space? Due to this step in cultural perception, we can expect to find barriers in cross-cultural communication and understanding, as people will associate and group together certain factors within a place differently based on their culture. The last step in this process is interpretation. The same situation can be decoded quite differently by diverse people. For example, interpretation may shift with subculture. If elements within a space don’t meet the needs of one’s subculture, they will then interpret that space more negatively than a space that could meet those same needs. In other words, culture is a way of directing the perception of its speakers, promoting habitual modes of analyzing experience. By sampling various groups within a particular place, and having them go through this three-step process, anthropologists and designers can often deduce the type of context culture a neighborhood has.

Neighborhoods with low-context cultures have very limited sharing between populations, while areas with high-context cultures have increased sharing between residents and a furthered understanding of each other. Extremely diverse neighborhoods often fall under the category of low-context, as differences in personal culture or social situation don’t often lend themselves to shared experiences between groups, or in the case of history, shared historical traditions. When designing for difference in perceptions affected by culture, one of the most important steps is to understand what type of context culture a place entertains. Designing for a space with increased sharing and limited shifts in internal perceptions looks extremely different than doing so for a space with very little shared characteristics between citizens.

Environment and Perception

Both history and culture, similar to the larger category of perception, function in a spatial setting or environment. Thus, it makes sense that in working to understand how people see space, one would look at the actual physical space. “Ecology, psychology, and other interdisciplinary research has demonstrated that human beings and their environments are produced in relation with one another.” Therefore, in order to understand environmental effects on perception, researchers must also look closely at the human values and goals within that space.

Similar to the way in which the category of history can be broken down, environment can be as well. In this research, particular attention is given to the ways in which built spaces
can be game-changers for the overall understanding of a neighborhood. However, we must first confirm that environmentally-based perceptions of a neighborhood actively shift the way that neighborhood is seen. Recent research has looked at the use of cognitive maps in order to do this. Cognitive mapping is the process that humans use to think about space and the ways in which they reflect and act within place.\textsuperscript{12} Milgram and Jodelet found that major elements of the city that they were studying emerged through the mapping process and that participants then linked these elements together through everyday experiences.

Within the process of cognitive mapping, Milgram and Jodelet had participants physically draw out a map of a particular neighborhood. When comparing the drawings, they recognized differences in what was being highlighted within the space. Oftentimes, the elements that people included on their map were places or characteristics of the area that held special value or importance within their lives.\textsuperscript{12} For example, many participants included their home, church, and workplace; while others drew a special park, restaurant, or store. While cognitive mapping can show that built elements often define physical space, Milgram and Jodelet’s study revealed something even more important—that no two people perceive a set space the same, especially when coming at it from an individual and internal lens.\textsuperscript{12} Thus, not all people relate to the world around them the same, due to differing relationships with environment.

An understanding of the specific cognitive mappings that people have towards a neighborhood would provide insight into what aspects are being valued or undervalued within that area. With this knowledge, designers can identify spaces within the neighborhood that a majority of their audience is resonating with in some way. By picking up on the feelings evoked by environment, designers can reinterpret place and sometimes even redefine it, catering to both internal and external viewers. Such research must also recognize the connection between historical memories and space and the natural human desire to invest in places with meaning and significance. While this can be positive, if people are seeking to find meaning in space identifiers that they have relied on in the past and do not find them in their current neighborhood, this can then create dissatisfaction. These memories or perceptions are referred to as environmental memories.

\textit{Social Factors and Perception}

The last category studied was social make-up. As you might imagine, one’s position in society shapes their view of space and place. While a person’s socio-economic background, family, occupational role, and economic rule impact day to day life, these factors also influence the choices one makes towards space. In reviewing current literature and studies, it became apparent that perception is affected by social factors. The act of separating and categorizing perceptions into the category of social factors is not always an easy or efficient task, as the various social factors of a space are ingrained within the other three areas of history, culture, and environment.
In social scientist Timothy Pachirat’s book, “Every 12 Seconds,” he discusses these social factors noting, “in addition to the assumptions that surround my various jobs in the slaughterhouse, my self-presentation, appearance, and mannerisms combined to create certain interpretations of me by others. Primary perhaps was my appearance…all of these factors and more affected how I was seen by others and consequently, what I was able to see.” Whether or not we recognize it, humans have preconceived perceptions of other people based on their social standing. Similar to the perceptions we have towards peoples’ social situations, humans have the same perceptions towards the social make-up of space—something tied largely to those residing within it.

Social influence on perception of place can also be defined as the factors that affect lifestyle—factors such as demographics, generational cycles, personal mindsets, evoked feelings, and social capital. Even health systems can be argued to be social factors as they are so affected by social determinants “such as income and wealth, education, occupation, and experiences based on racial or ethnic identification.” In analyzing place in regards to social factors, we cannot solely focus on the factors themselves, but must also study the institutions that are meant to address these factors.

Therefore, in order to understand the social factors most prevalent in Twin Towers, this project relied heavily on neighborhood statistics, personal narratives, and direct observation that largely categorized the second phase of this research.

4. Phase 2: Developing Twin Towers Narrative

Background

Findings from Phase 1 confirmed the initial part of this project’s hypothesis. History, culture, environment and social make-up were affecting perception of place and could be broken down into these categories. From there, analysis of the chosen neighborhood, Twin Towers, could be started.

Twin Towers is a relatively small neighborhood in east Dayton, defined by its borders of Wayne Avenue, Wyoming Street, Steve Whalen Boulevard, and U.S. Route 35 (seen in Figure 1). With consistently high immigration and poverty rates, Twin Towers was ranked barely livable when this research was started in the summer of 2017. The area has a population of roughly 2,900 people and a median income of $17,000. Around 47% of the population has received a high school diploma and about 10% hold some sort of higher degree. The neighborhood began as a largely German and Appalachian community with a smaller presence of Jewish populations and has transitioned into a largely Caucasian, Hispanic, and African-American make-up. As initial information was gathered on Twin Towers, I began running into differences in perceptions before interviews were conducted. At the same time that these differences were appearing, I was also hearing directly from people that the space had many community assets and strong neighborhood pride. The initial shifts in understandings of the Twin Towers neighborhood confirmed that the space was experiencing gaps in perception and would
be a suitable neighborhood to conduct my research on. After this point, interviews were conducted.

![Figure 1: The Twin Towers neighborhood](image)

**Interviews**

Interviews were conducted with internal, external, and midway sources. Internal sources are those people living within the Twin Towers neighborhood and that have a stake within the space. Midway sources are those that do not live within the space, yet have knowledge of the neighborhood and have been within it one or more times. An example of a midway source is a social service provider that works with clients from Twin Towers, or volunteers from UD that work at the Mission of Mary gardens. External sources are those that do not live or work within the space and have little knowledge of the area. Interviews often lasted between 30-45 minutes and were based on questions that revealed the interviewees understandings and perceptions of the area. Around 20 people were interviewed within each “source” category allowing for an even distribution of perceptions analyzed. After collecting an ample body of information these interviews were turned into narratives or stories, and then analyzed.

**Analysis**

Narratives were broken down and categorized by the four factors studied in Phase 1: history, culture, environment, and social make-up. By breaking down the narratives and categorizing them, I was then able to find characteristics at the heart of both the Twin
Towers neighborhood and perceptions of Twin Towers (process shown in Figure 2). After categorizing them, these notes were thematized, pulling out the main elements within each of the four categories. The characteristics drawn out of this phase had been repeated several times during interviews and were revealing themselves over and over again in the existing function of Twin Towers. Some of these characteristics are the role of reputation and hope, environmental boundaries such as US 35 and Route 70, resource deprivation, housing vacancies, generational differences, diversity, and entitlement (additional characteristics shown in Figure 3).

Figure 2: Process of narrative analysis

<table>
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<th>overarching themes:</th>
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<td>Immigration</td>
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<td>Lack of Interest</td>
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Figure 3: Overarching themes from Twin Towers
5. Results and Discussion

Findings on History

Several things were realized after analyzing how history has affected perceptions of Twin Towers. The first being that Twin Towers is a neighborhood with rich history; however, this history isn’t actively being harnessed or shared. The history of Twin Towers has been passed down orally throughout generations largely due to the Appalachian culture at the neighborhood’s foundation. Because of this, the neighborhood’s history is disappearing as older residents move out or pass away. This creates a huge shift in understanding of the space, especially as this history isn’t accessible, except to those that know the stories. Furthermore, existing history tends to serve as a point of comparison for many.

Figure 4 depicts Twin Towers in the early 1900s, while Figure 5 shows the same street in current day. While the physical environment has shifted in these images, seen in structural building changes, many other characteristics of the space have changed as well. For example, residents whose parents lived in Twin Towers during the early 1990s most likely know that Twin Towers used to be a thriving business district. As one can see in the older image, the buildings in the upper left are all occupied homes or businesses. In the upper right, we can see the Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company. If the image was extended further to the right the viewer would have seen a movie theater, bowling alley, jewelry store, and bakery. The Twin Towers neighborhood no longer has any of these resources and Xenia Avenue—the street these pictures look out on—is now mainly home to churches, vacant houses, and social services. Therefore, a person driving down Xenia Avenue today would be entering the space unaware of its past history and the legacy the street carries. This history is largely unannounced or exhibited, and fails to be recognized through historical preservation. Not many of Twin Towers’ historic buildings have been invested in or repurposed—a failed opportunity to involve both internal and external players in space.

Figure 4: View of Xenia Avenue from the steps of Saint Mary Catholic Church (2017)
Findings on Culture

The various cultures of Twin Towers reveal just how diverse the space is. Because of this diversity, Twin Towers has a low-context culture, resulting in limited sharing and connectivity. Twin Towers also has a large immigrant population, as well as a wide range of ages. Due to shifts in age and ethnicity, Twin Towers caters to many types of people, even though the physical space lends itself to some cultures over others. Furthermore, because Twin Towers sits between two areas of wealth, The University of Dayton and The Oregon District, some internal residents feel unwelcome transitioning from one space to another, while external players are unsure if their subcultural needs will be met.\textsuperscript{17}

Another example of culture’s influence on perception can be seen engrained in specific mindsets within the space. Several interviewees noted a mindset of entitlement among internal sources. This mindset is often connected to inaction. The presence of social services and nonprofits draw many people into the neighborhood in search of resources from these organizations.\textsuperscript{17} Although positive in many ways, this can also create a dependency on institutions that support certain social conditions or lifestyles. Therefore, if working to shift perceptions, design solutions need to target these internal mindsets and systems while also recognizing that many of these people coming into the neighborhood are not residents.

Findings on Environment

One of the most influential elements of environment that has affected current perceptions of the Twin Towers neighborhood is the role of environmental boundaries. These boundaries manifest themselves in the form of roads; highways; and empty buildings,
homes, or lots. One example of environment and history’s effect on perception can be seen in the results of US Route 35 on the neighborhood. The construction of Route 35 began in the 1960s and although predicted to take five years to complete, ended up taking ten. The construction displaced over 20,000 people and led to the closure of many shops and local businesses, some of which were mentioned in relation to Figure 4. Its construction led to the first and main flight of people from Twin Towers. Route 35 also cut off Twin Towers from downtown Dayton as well as surrounding neighborhoods, allowing these space to progress while Twin Towers was stalled by division and displacement. These environmental effects can still be seen today in the lack of neighborhood resources, specifically businesses. Ever since the construction of Route 35, Twin Towers has been unable to maintain spaces of economic development.

The lack of resources limits opportunities for the shift of perceptions. “Resource deprivation triggers feelings of alienation and dependency, weakening mechanisms of informal social control, a conclusion supported by Velez (2001), who found that disadvantaged neighborhoods most needed to rely on public methods of social control.” Thus, the lack of environmental resources can often promote a passivity towards space and an increase in the need for social services.

Findings on Social Factors

Some of the main social factors that revealed themselves in Twin Towers were the role of mental health, trauma, income, and poverty. For example, Twin Towers was hit relatively hard in the recent opioid epidemic. However, after several interviews detailing overdoses and a lengthy interview with the Montgomery Country Drug Court, I learned that a majority of those coming into the space and overdosing were not residents, but rather people from other suburbs driven by the social services Twin Towers provided. While internal and even midway sources may know this, external perceptions are readily affected by initial observations of space; thus, news sources and stories detailing any negative actions have greater potential to be distorted. As we learned about perceptual constancy, any one negative perception will often remain stable even if a viewer is presented with conflicting information. While many perceptions are rooted in social factors, the reality of the situation touches on a lack of environmental resources and misconceptions around the culture of Twin Towers.

Overall Findings

In the end, Phase 2 of this research revealed a great deal about the Twin Towers neighborhood. The combination of findings from Phase 1 and Phase 2 revealed that Twin Towers is an extremely diverse neighborhood with various understandings of space. One of the main goals of this research was to determine the extent of gaps in perception and to identify them. Observations of the Twin Towers neighborhood revealed that the biggest gaps between perceptions of the Twin Towers neighborhood exist between internal and external perceptions. Internally, because of the high diversity within the space, Twin Towers has a low-context culture. There is extremely limited sharing of thoughts, understandings, and perceptions. While this can be positive as it allows for more freedom
in individual space definition, it can also be negative with an increase in tensions, lack of empathy, and less overall connectivity. For external sources, minimal neighborhood assets create less opportunities for non-residents to come into the space. Furthermore, perceptual constancy rooted in social factors makes it difficult for Twin Towers to shift its overall reputation. The next and final phase of this research, directly targets this gap in perceptions, while also nodding to the findings in both Phase 1 and 2.

6. Phase 3: Designing for Diversity

**Background**

Much of what designers do is create perception, setting the context for how content is perceived. In studying design, we begin to realize that humans are creatures of judgement and tend to form opinions in a matter of seconds—often solely based on design. Therefore, when seeking to change the way people view a neighborhood or space, it makes sense to turn towards design. However, neighborhood and community design cannot be done isolated from the realities of the neighborhood—one of the main reasons that qualitative data was collected through the form of interviews. This method allowed me to actually connect with residents of the neighborhood—people who have a stake in the perceptions I was striving to discover. Furthermore, “it is shown that towns and buildings will not be able to come alive unless they are made by all of the people in society and unless these people share a common pattern language within which to make these buildings and unless this common pattern language is alive itself.” This research provided the opportunity to gather an in-depth understanding of the history, culture, environment, and social factors before proposing anything design-related. This assured that anything proposed would not only match up with the current design language of the Twin Towers neighborhood, but would also be informed by those with a stake in the space.

**Personas**

A major part of the design process is identifying a target audience. When working on large design or event proposals, nonprofits and marketing companies will often create a set of personas—fictional biographies that represent real people within a target audience. Personas allow these organizations to focus on specific micro-target audiences, making sure that the needs of each are fully met through the proposal or design. Thus, in following this logic, I developed a set of personas based off of the narratives from Phase 2 and that would represent a majority of the “players” of the Twin Towers Neighborhood. These personas ranged from figures like George, who is 75 and has been living in Twin Towers his whole life, to Maria, who is 23, a recent college grad, and is just now moving into Twin Towers. Figures 6-7 show several more of these. From these personas, I created an initial design statement for the neighborhood proposal. This statement reads: “The Twin Towers neighborhood has an extremely diverse history, culture, environment, and social make-up. Such diversity lends itself to various lived experiences and understandings of place. On an external level these perceptions can be changed through a unified neighborhood identity, shifting the way outsiders see the space. Internally, there
is a lack of sharing and connectivity, something that can only come from in-person contact.”

Figure 6: Twin Towers personas

Figure 7: Twin Towers personas
Neighborhood Proposal

Part 1: Identity Guide

Thus, because of this, the final phase of my research took the form of a two-fold neighborhood revitalization plan. The first part of this plan consisted of a general neighborhood identity guide, targeting external perceptions of the neighborhood. Figures 8-12 show various elements of this identity guide, such as a neighborhood logo, visual elements and graphics, taglines, typography, and colors. The goal of this identity guide is to serve as a brand guide for the space, essentially reimagining the Twin Towers neighborhood. All of the included elements nod to the space’s history, culture, environment, and social factors and fall in line with the existing pattern language of space.

Figure 8: Twin Towers Identity Guide
Figure 9: Proposed logo for Twin Towers

Figure 10: Proposed branding sample
By implementing a unified brand for the neighborhood, Twin Towers would be seen as cohesive, welcoming, and well-maintained. Many external perceptions of the neighborhood are based off of outdated reputations of the space. As humans are visual creatures, we unconsciously look at the design of spaces—something Twin Towers hasn’t given much thought to. Residents and community leaders want visitors to realize that there is much more to Twin Towers, one of Dayton’s original neighborhoods, than what meets the eye. As Twin Towers revamps its space, perceptions must be readdressed and shifted towards a reinvestment in the community and in the neighborhood’s future.

The colors chosen for the Twin Towers identity guide can be seen in Figure 11 and come directly from colors sampled within the neighborhood. The grays are modern and clean and hint back to Dayton’s manufacturing and working-class roots. The browns draw on the warmth of the neighborhood community and the bright orange symbolizes the bright future that lies ahead. Although younger families are starting to move into the neighborhood, there is still a large older generation present. These colors were chosen to satisfy the visual preferences of both populations.

Figure 12 shows examples of possible neighborhood markers and signage. These markers would be used to signal to people that they are entering or are already within the Twin Towers neighborhood. These markers will help identify the Twin Towers space and connect residents and visitors alike, creating a better awareness of space and also functioning as an additional medium of the Twin Towers brand.

Figure 11: Proposed colors for the identity guide
Figure 12: Examples of neighborhood markers
Part 2: Community Hub

The second part of the revitalization plan targets internal perceptions, something that can be done through in-person contact and opportunities to develop connections despite diversity. Thus, this second part of the plan works towards four main goals: to harness history, build business, support diversity, and create connective spaces. The Twin Towers community hub will harness history by restoring a historic building within Twin Towers, not only creating a sense of historical preservation as mentioned in Phase 1, but also starting a new historical tradition within the space. Within this building there will be an area that references the history of Twin Towers, acknowledging those who have been in the neighborhood and lived through this history, while also giving others the opportunity to learn about the space and connect with this history, hopefully generating neighborhood pride. The space will build business by featuring a market with 18-20 vendor spots, in which people can sell locally-produced goods. The building will also include a local coffee shop, driving in business past the coffee shops on Wayne Avenue and furthering external interest and awareness of the neighborhood. The community hub will support diversity by selling all local products, especially those made by immigrants and refugees within the neighborhood. The space will be open to the public and all ages. Furthermore, in working to create a connective space, the hub will harness an innovation space that can be used by various neighborhood partners, such as Mission of Mary. It will also have meeting and event rooms that can be used by the community and that will serve as a space separate from the usual meeting places within the neighborhood. These spaces will allow residents to come together, generate ideas, and participate in dialogue. Lastly, the building will make use of several classrooms, open to nonprofits and Ruskin Elementary for field trips or workshops.

Figure 13 details these four components while Figure 14 shows the proposed location: 342 Xenia Avenue. The empty building is three stories tall and would adequately hold the proposed elements that can be seen in the rough floor plans of Figure 15. Furthermore, the proposed building is located on one of the main streets of the neighborhood and was chosen for its close proximity to Ruskin, neighborhood churches, and several social services. The building also resides at a main intersection off of Wayne Avenue. As mentioned above, the goal of the design proposal is to overcome the found gaps in internal and external perceptions. The neighborhood identity plan works to create a cohesive and well-designed communal brand that will generate external interest and positive perceptions of the neighborhood, hopefully shifting perceptions solely engrained in social stigmas or skewed understandings of the environmental, historical, or cultural reputation of Twin Towers. The community hub, on the other hand, works to target internal perceptions—those rooted in cultural understandings and historical traditions. This tangible and accessible space will foster in-person connection and communication and serve as a grounding point in the pattern language of space and a starting point for increased economic drive and space investment.
Figure 13: Four components of the community hub

- Restore historic building
- Feature area that nods to this history

- Market with 18 vendor spots
- Local coffee shop

- Sell all local products
- Open to the public
- Spaces for all ages

- Innovation space
- Meeting and event rooms
- Classrooms

Figure 14: View of 342 Xenia Avenue, the proposed location for the community hub
In Progress

Although thoroughly developed, there are some components of the third phase of research that are still in progress. Current work is centered on illustrating 3D-renderings of the floor plans and designing neighborhood markers. Further work needs to be done on a business plan for the coffee shop and proposed market. In looking forward, I am hoping to bring together Twin Towers residents to go over the proposal and transition research to the community. Lastly, I hope to develop a write-up of Twin Towers history for both the physical community hub and for the community in general as much of this history is being lost with time.

7. Conclusion

Many things go into perception of place. While it is very much rooted in the individual, a majority of it is external. This research confirmed that perceptions of place can be studied and understood through the categories of history, culture, environment and social make-up. While findings revealed that these factors don’t necessarily influence perception equally, all do actively influence and affect perception of place. In studying the Twin Towers neighborhood, I was able to learn about a specific urban neighborhood with Dayton, Ohio—one that has a diverse make-up similar to many others in the area and across the United States. This research shows the importance of gathering qualitative data, especially when it comes to ethnographic studies and environmental design. The
collection of quantitative data and statistics would have been inadequate in the search to understand real feelings and understandings of space. Thus, the means of storytelling was essential in identifying differences in perception and the gaps of perception between internal and external sources. My in-depth study of perception before interviews were conducted, allowed me to then see the underlying influence of these factors in perceptions toward the Twin Towers neighborhood. This knowledge allowed me to create a more informed design proposal, as suggested in my hypothesis.

8. Future Studies

While this study was able to determine the key factors of place and their effect on perceptions of the Twin Towers neighborhood, I am still curious as to what the limitations of design in shifting perceptions might be. Further research is needed in order to determine this. On a larger scale, this research leaves room for a more global expansion in understanding perception, especially when looking to apply the study of perception of place towards the transition of diverse populations into either homogenous or extremely diverse spaces. For example, how might this research be applied to the integration of refugees into urban neighborhoods, and on a larger scale, how do perceptions of singular populations then affect overall perceptions of countries and nations, as well as the investment of space within those environments? This study in particular notes how important it is for urban planners, graphic designers, and community leaders to be aware of internal, midway, and external perceptions, as well as what elements of history, culture, environment, and social make-up are actively defining the space that they are working within. However, this research lacked the man-power to sample a larger number of sources, something that would be beneficial moving forward and that could lend itself to more discoveries within the studied neighborhood.
9. Footnotes

12 “Human Perception and Environmental Experience.” *The People, Place, and Space Reader*, peopleplacespace.org/.