

Research Article

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Examining the Functional Roles of Street Characteristics in Influencing the Sense of Place

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Abstract

Keywords

cultural role;
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street characteristics;
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Street has played multi functional purposes. It is not only a place for business, but also for interaction, communication, and culture activities. Mosul City Centre in Iraq has witnessed a negligence crisis that can threaten the character of the city and reduce the functional roles of public spaces. So, this research endeavours to examine two of these functional roles, namely: the social and cultural roles of Nineveh Street in Mosul City Centre, Iraq. The study asks what are the social and cultural roles which Nineveh Street plays in giving the sense of place in Mosul City Centre? Mixed methods are adopted in this study using the triangulation design through the combination of quantitative data with qualitative data to further analyse and facilitate comparisons and relations between them. Three Hundred Thirty questionnaire surveys was used to provide quantitative data, besides 30 interviews as well as observation to provide qualitative data. As a result, Nineveh Street has played weak cultural and social roles in influencing the sense of place, thus there is a need to restore these roles to secure the sense of place in Mosul City Centre.

Introduction

Historically, streets in cities and towns were used as spaces to serve basic survival, communication and entertainment needs and to perform several political, religious, commercial, civic and social functions. Even in current times, streets are an important part of public open space in the city. People depend on streets for functional, social, and leisure activities, for playing, meeting, interaction with other people; and even for relaxation (Mehta, 2009, p.380) Street is defined as one of the important elements that act as a public open space. Its essential role can be seen through its function as (i) a communication channel and (ii) a social and activity space (Moughtin, 2006 and Krier, 1979). The street is a form of interaction of human populations with

the architectural fabric. Moreover, Al-Talib and Fakruddin (2013) mentioned that the street is a reflection of the city life. The street is the container for the performance of various humanitarian actors such as social, cultural, and commercial activities.

Nowadays, rapid development has made an impact towards streets' development that acts as a public space, particularly the streets of the city centres. In Iraq, Mosul City Centre has witnessed a negligence crisis that can threaten the character of the city and reduce the functional roles of public spaces (Mustafa, 2013). This issue puts the architects and designers in front of difficult challenges to strengthen the character, and sense

Historically, Nineveh Street played an important role as a social, cultural, and political space. People enjoyed participating in the festivals which started in this street and went to other streets. For example; "Um Al-Rabeen Festival" or "Spring festival" was one of the main annual festivals in Mosul City (see Figure 2).

Moreover, Nineveh Street is one of the main streets for political parties, demonstrations, and uprisings due to it containing many buildings of the Baath Party as well as its links with Ghazi Street or Al-Thawrra Street.

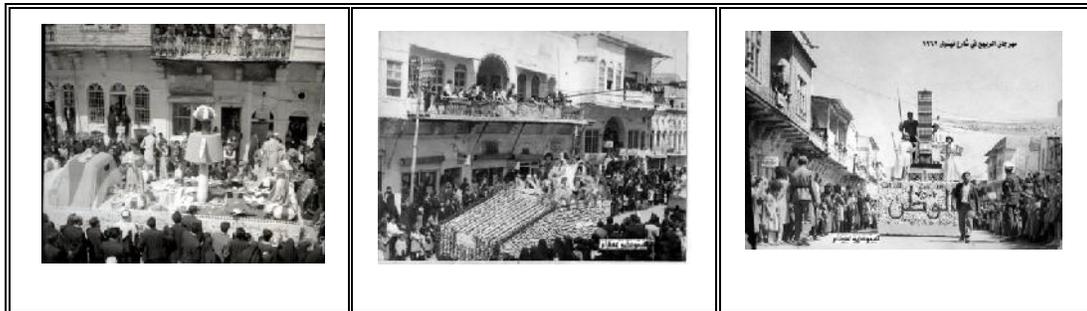


Figure 2: Spring Festival in the Street in the sixties of the twentieth century

Literature

1. Streets as Social Spaces

Streets are not only a means of access but also an arena for social expression (Moughtin, 2006; Sholihah, 2005). Sholihah (2005) mentioned that people use streets as a medium of interaction with each other. It is in street space where people can see and are to be seen. According to the same researcher quoted from Eichner and Tobey (1987), there are eleven social uses of streets, including using the street for strolling and window-shopping, resting, people-watching, vendors, telephones, newspapers, art works and banners, schmoozing, eating, waiting, orientation or information seeking, street performers, drinking fountains, and finally fountains.

Numerous studies, such as those of Sammas (2008), and Sholihah (2005) quoted from Gehl (2002), have established that most social interaction in streets take place where there are pedestrians. The aforementioned researchers state that such interaction involves social activities, necessary activities, optional activities (urban recreation). The first one, social activities, occurs when people move about in shared spaces and experience active and passive participation of people with others such as conversing, listening, watching, and children's play. As for the second, it includes all activities that relate to livelihood, going to work, waiting for buses or people, and carrying out chores. The quality of the physical environment has little to no influence on carrying out such activities since people have no choice but to do so. Optional activities, the third type, are things that people are inclined to do when the surroundings and exterior physical

conditions of a given place are attractive and inviting, hence quality has a vital role in whether these activities occur or not, and includes having picnics, sightseeing, sunbathing, and recreational strolling.

On other hand, Ortiz (2012) points out to the successful public spaces where celebrations are held, where social interactions take place, where one finds and gathers with one's friends, where ideas are exchanged, where one expresses oneself, where one rests and observes, and where one finds the public institutions of cities. Jacobs (1995) proposes eight characters of a good street that refers to a liveable street, namely a street that can be a place for people to walk with some leisure, giving physical comfort, having a clear definition, having quality that engage the eyes. Streets provide opportunities for short-term, low intensity contacts that constitute easy interactions with other people in a relaxed and relatively undemanding way (Mehta, 2009; Gehl, 1987). It is suggested that these short-term, low-intensity contacts or weak ties are possible beginnings of deeper and more long-term social interactions and engagements between people (Mehta, 2009; Jacobs, 1961).

Both Rudofsky (1969) and Baghi (2011) assert that the historical role of streets in cities is to be utilised as spaces serving basic survival, entertainment and communication needs, in addition to fulfilling particular civic, social, religious, commercial, and political roles. Despite the contemporary trend, many studies (Jacobs, 1961; Appleyard, 1981; Carmona et al., 2003) observe that till this day some societies depend on streets for functional, leisure, and social

activities, which includes shopping, travelling, playing, interacting with other people, meeting, and relaxation, as such is particularly the case in a multitude of centre-city and multi-use neighbourhoods.

The street is also an environment that offers multiple lessons for children just by watching people and their activities. Experiences in public spaces are not only a source for the education of children in learning how to cope with new situations in real life (Jacobs, 1961), but also for the education of adults in learning, by observing the way people do things differently (Lofland). Additionally, seeing other people engage in activities can be an inspiration to engage in new activities. Hence, even in contemporary times, the street, as a social space, can play multiple roles and offer social contact and interaction, social awareness and learning, and social cohesion. Therefore, Donnelley (2010, pp.38) emphasises that the design of all streets should recognise the importance of creating places for people to enjoy rather than simply providing corridors for the movement of traffic. Streets should generally be designed with a focus on social interaction.

2. Streets as Cultural Spaces

According to Sammas (2008), cultural-based street activities refer to parades, street events, art performances, street musicians, traditional foods, culture-based goods such as crafts, and so forth, that form the life of a street. As Sammas (2008) acknowledges, "the street is primarily cultural based in that it is the result of unwritten rules, customs, traditions, habits, and the prevailing lifestyle and definition of activities appropriate to that setting". Further, Sammas (2008) quoted from Rapoport (1987) states that cultural variables are primary to any activity, including walking and others, occurring in streets. It is culture that structures behaviour and helps explain the use or non-use of streets and other urban spaces or of other settings. Thus, the use of streets by pedestrians is primarily culturally based as the physical environment does not determine behaviour. Physical environment, however, can be supportive or inhibiting. Given this culturally based predisposition towards obeying unwritten rules of proper street use, people can also be influenced by physical variables.

The streets are full of a great variety of people in all sorts of costumes, not only walking and riding but standing, sitting, squatting and lying down; sleeping, cooking, eating, getting their hair shaved; doing

laundry, fixing bicycles or tires, manufacturing things, sewing, playing, chanting, arguing, bargaining and even praying. He describes the uses of streets in terms of a great world theatre, drama, and comedy, both spontaneous and contrived, supplied by daily life. Streets are the setting for funerals as well as the wedding festivities. Streets are where music is performed by street musicians and where one can also enjoy street theatres and street concerts. The street vendor's cry is not a cry in the narrow sense of the word but a musical phrase repeated infinitum, melodically precise and unequivocal as to its meaning.

According to Lai, et al. (2013), culture is one of the attributes to devote the significance of a place. According to City Council (2003), activity refers to the presence of an active street life, extent of pedestrian flows across different times of day and night, number of cultural events and celebration over the year, and the extent to which a place feels lively. Programming events and activities to occur in streets, buildings, and spaces will generate vitality for particular slots of time; however, for long-term sustained urban vitality, diversity of land uses and activities is essential. Street festivals, fairs, and celebration are important because they draw the whole population into active participation, as well as giving a certain sense to that place (City Council, 2003, pp.46).

According to McClinchey (2011), festivals, along with other leisure experiences, are perceived as important components of vibrant, diverse and creative urban spaces. Cultural festivals, in particular, are rapidly becoming an acceptable form of urban tourism in that they allow for the consumption of ethnic culture and are part of the overall experience economy. Cultural festivals have the potential to provide social benefits by contributing to a sense of shared identity, civic pride, cultural pride, community cohesiveness, place and belonging, and are also perceived as place image boosters. In his study, McClinchey (2011) concludes that festivals may contribute to a sense of place, but not substantially. The role of the festival was as a space for the showcasing and communication of culture, as a connection that ethno-cultural group leaders needed to maintain throughout the year in order to connect to broader meanings of place and identity. The festival allowed cultural entrepreneurs to value their own ethnic identity, maintain their cultural traditions and increase the awareness of their culture. In line of McClinchey's findings, Shamsuddin and Ujang (2008) state that traditional streets or cultural spaces played the role in generating an identity and economic value to such place. This research identifies

the role of functional characteristics as a cultural space in giving the sense of place. This role of streets may or may not have a strong relation with the sense of place.

Results and Discussion:

1. As a Social Space

According to the survey, Nineveh Street plays some role as a social space. Only 78 out of 319 respondents

used this street for leisure, relaxing, eating, and chatting. The highest number of them preferred two places, namely, the fish restaurants in Al-Maidan area and the restaurants along this street at 7% (N=22) and 6% (N=20) respectively, because their strategic locations (see Figure 3). This is in contrast with the Sholihah's (2005) findings where Malioboro Street offers possibilities for street users to do social activities including gathering, and necessary activities.

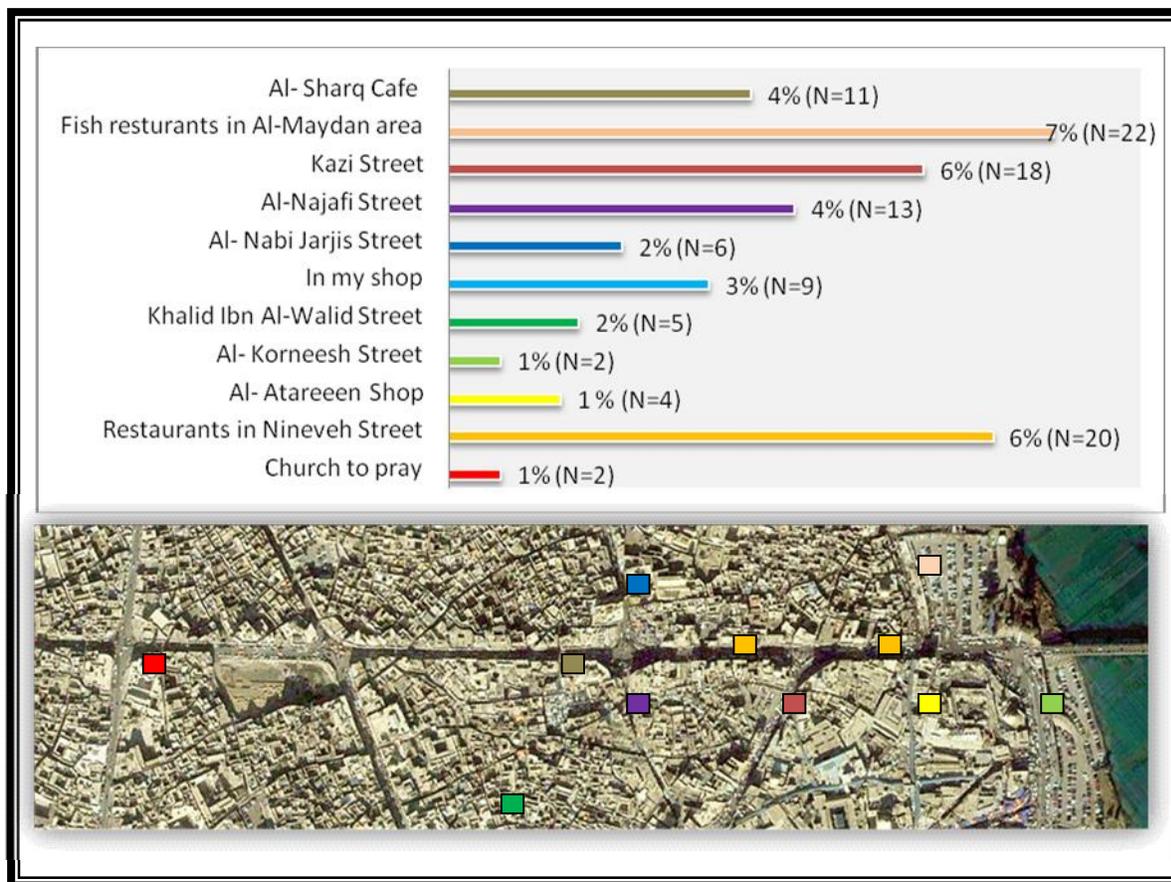


Figure 3: Preferred place / street (s) associated with social activities

The other streets that are linked to Nineveh Street also add some roles to Nineveh Street. All streets were mentioned by the respondents who use them as a social space. The highest percentage of respondents recognised this street as a social space due to its strategic location and plenty of things to do (see Figure 4). The visiting of Nineveh Street was a short

pleasure trip because this street is linked with other streets in the core of Mosul City Centre. In these streets one can see friends, do many things, watch lots of activities, and eat, as reflected by many respondents during the field interview in their description of this statement.

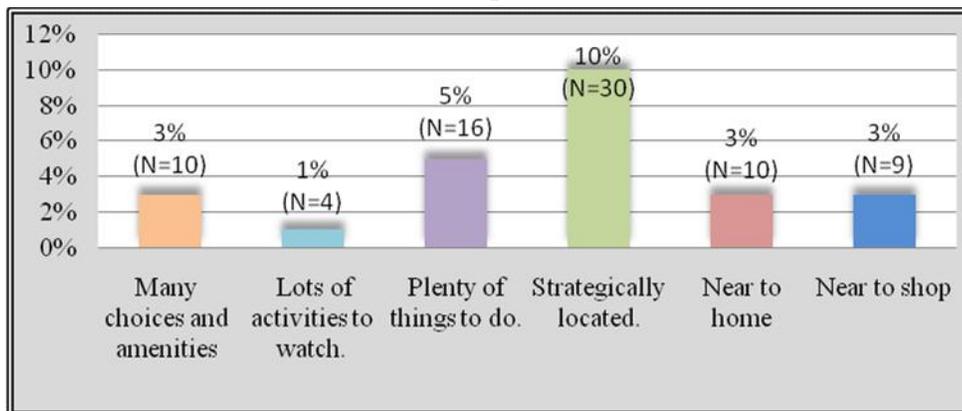


Figure 4: The reasons of choosing the place / street (s) by respondents as associated with social activities

Moreover, the majority of respondents tend to come alone to this street more than being in the company of friends or family. It was observed and supported by most of the interviewees that political circumstances have had a negative effect on the role of the Street as a social space.

With the bad political conditions in Mosul City, the quality of social role becomes difficult for to achieve in Nineveh Street. When people see friends, meet and greet their neighbours, and feel comfortable interacting with strangers, they tend to feel a stronger sense of place to the street, as mentioned by PPS (2008). Thus, it was apparent that Nineveh Street played some role as a social space. Perhaps these are the reasons behind the unavailability of most social activities mentioned by Metha (2007) which are standing, sitting, laying, talking, eating and drinking, reading, using a laptop, window-shopping, smoking, vending, playing a game or musical instrument, listening to musicians, and so on. The political circumstances in Mosul City have had a negative effect in making an unsafe and uncomfortable

environment in Nineveh Street which diminishes the social interaction among people. It may further threaten the social role of the street if it continues for a longer period. The weakness of the social role can weaken social ties among street users, thus it helps to reduce the role of the street as a social space and its sense of place.

2. As a Cultural Space

According to the survey, religious and cultural celebrations and festivals play some role in presenting Nineveh Street as a cultural space. Typically, cultural goods and traditional foods had an important role in making this street unique, as they were mentioned by 62% (N=199) and 31% (N=98) of the respondents respectively (see Figure 5). Traditional food and cultural goods are located just in Al-Maidan Area, where the traditional fish restaurants, and handmade and crafts markets such as the blacksmiths market, coppersmiths market, and traditional carpentry markets are located (see Figure 6).

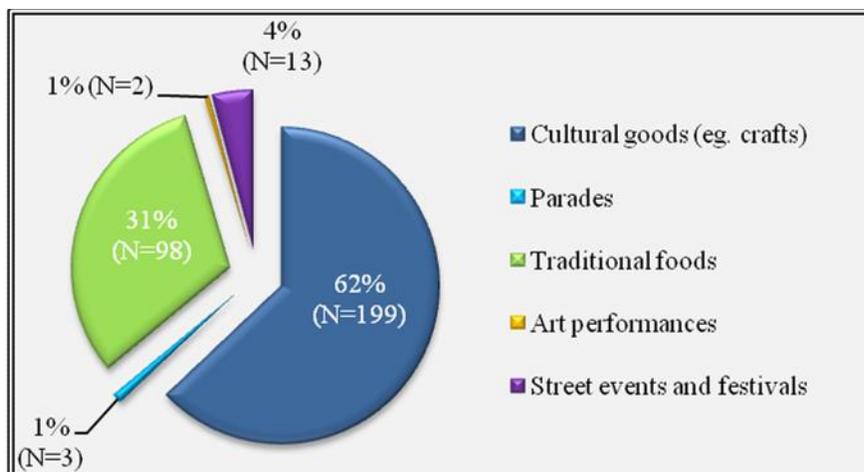


Figure 5: The most distinctive features in the Street associated with the cultural role

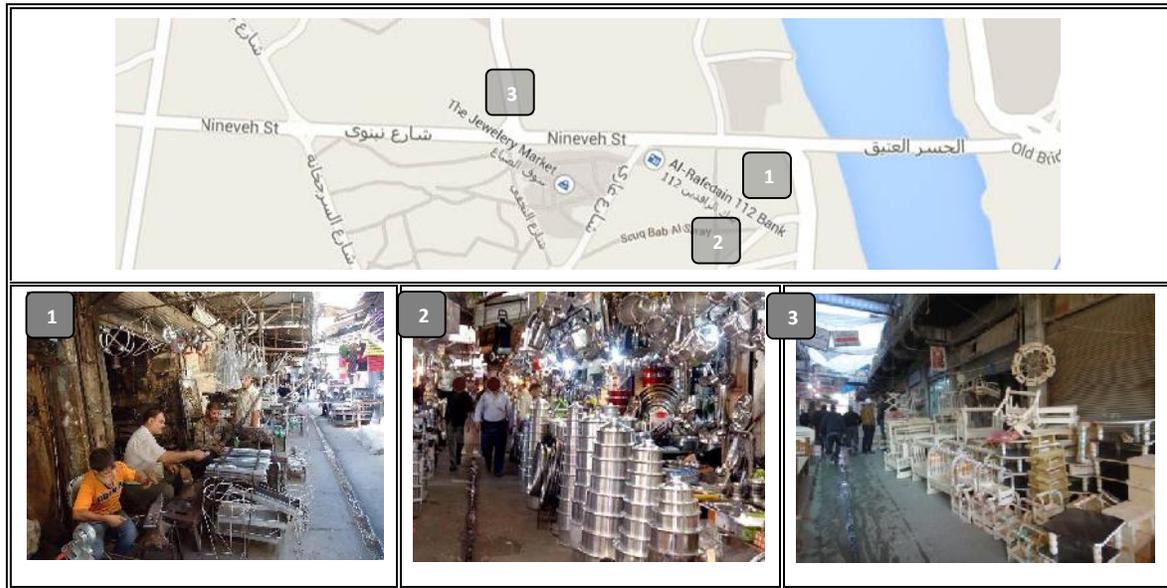


Figure 6: The cultural and artistic goods

In addition, only 29% (N=91) of the respondents considered this street as important in religious and cultural celebrations, festivals and events. In the past years, this street witnessed many political, cultural, and religious events, i.e. event of the birth of the Prophet Mohammed. However, in the last three years, people could not prepare this event due to the changing political circumstances that has made this street unsafe. This was illustrated by many of the respondents in field interview.

On the other hand, most of the respondents considered that the role of Nineveh Street as a cultural space comes from the ease of movement on it as well as the multiplicity of links of the Street with other streets

(see Figure 7). Most of the celebrations previously were held in Nineveh Street because it is a main street and it connects with many streets around it. The most important connection is with the Old Bridge because most of the events and celebrations, such as the Spring Festival that occurred in this Street, turned and toured to the left side of Mosul City through the Old Bridge because it was the only bridge in Mosul City at the time. From the field observation, it is clear that Nineveh Street is very straight as well as many of the surrounded streets leading to it. These issues facilitated in establishing cultural events, such as the Spring Festival, and were transferred to the other side of Mosul City through the Old Bridge for celebrations.

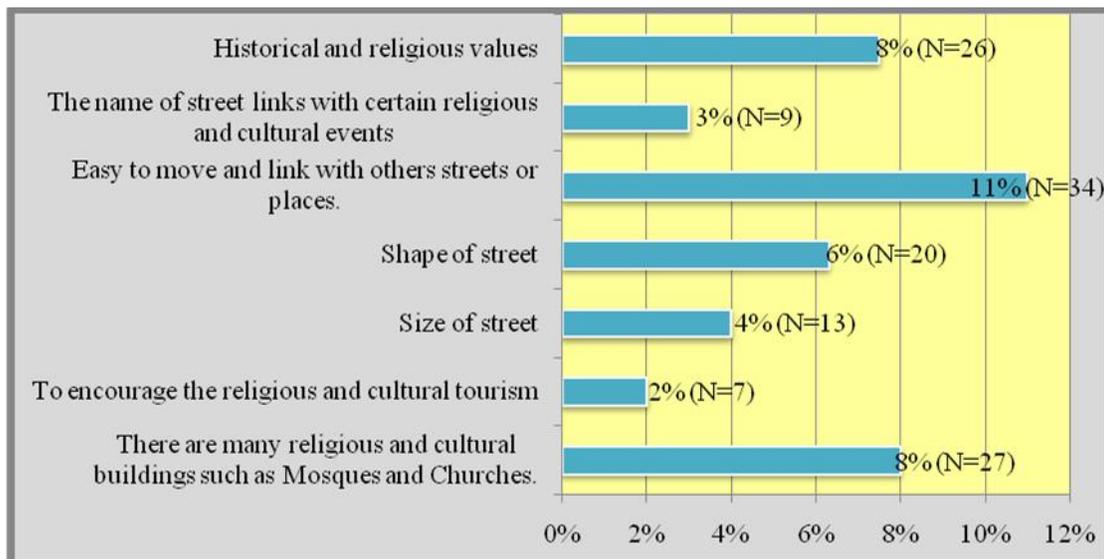


Figure 7: The importance of the Street in religious and cultural celebrations

It is evident from the analysis above that Nineveh Street played some role as a space for events and festivals, while the cultural role of Nineveh Street concentrated on traditional foods and handmade goods. It was clear that only 29% (N=91) of the respondents found this street as important in the celebration of religious and cultural events. This is due to the bad political circumstances which have taken place in Mosul City. This was the same reason that reduced the role of the Street as a social space. Nevertheless, Nineveh Street appears to be the cultural space of Mosul City Centre.

Conclusions

The study demonstrates that sense of place is strongly linked to the role of cultural and social features of Commercial streets. In terms of social roles of the Street, unavailability of relaxing places such as parks and cafeterias have forced the streets' users, especially shopkeepers and shop owners, to go to restaurants to eat and take a rest. In addition, the difficult political conditions that Mosul City witnessed in recent times made all outdoor spaces, including streets, an uncomfortable and unsuitable place to relax and chat because the occurrence of sudden explosions and assassinations.

This study ensures that the presence of cultural goods like handmade clothes, cooking pots, souvenirs, artistic goods and others enhance the role of streets in terms of cultural activities. The results also reveal lack in art performance, and street events and festivals in Nineveh Street that consequently effect on the roles of street as a cultural space. In addition, this study found that the presence of mosques, churches, historical buildings, and connected streets with others can strength the cultural values of streets for fostering sense of place. Thus, this study recommends continuous maintaining for religious and cultural buildings in the Street.

Culturally and socially Nineveh Street have played weak roles in relating to the sense of place. Research on the role of the cultural and social characteristics of Nineveh Street in Mosul City Centre indicates the need for more identifiable roles to enhance the sense of place in Mosul City Centre. Thus, the findings suggest that restoring the roles of Nineveh Street as a cultural and social space is necessary for influencing the sense of place. The establishment of religious and cultural celebrations and events can enhance the role of streets as a cultural space. Thus, all people in

charge should take these features into account to give a good sense to streets.

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