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## Cinema as a Mirror of Urban Identity Crisis: Semiotics and Sustainability in ‘Dark City’

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### Abstract

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Identity is a foundational element of human civilization, shaping the meaning and sustainability of urban spaces. This study examines how evolving identities, influenced by modernism, impact urban sustainability, using the film *Dark City* as a case study. Modernism has extremely altered individual and collective identities, with these shifts evident in cultural mediums like cinema. Applying a semiotic analysis framework, the research analyzes sustainable place indicators to assess identity’s role in defining spaces. Findings indicate that modernism has eroded place identity, weakening urban sustainability in social, environmental, and cultural dimensions. The study concludes that sustaining meaningful urban environments requires preserving and revitalizing identity, positioning it as a critical factor in future urban development. By linking cinematic representation to real-world urban challenges, this research highlights the urgent need to reconcile modernity with place-based identity to foster resilient, sustainable cities.

**Keywords:** Identity, sense of place, sustainable place, urban sustainability, semiotics, movie.

### 1. Introduction

Today, the cinema industry is one of the basic tools for showing socio-economic conditions, social-political crises, identity uncertainties, and different needs of societies. The modern era is one of the most challenging historical periods of societies, where fundamental changes are seen in various fields, from individual identity characteristics to architectural style changes.

In the classification of science-fiction films, the difference between the three periods of pre-modernism, modernism, and post-modernism can be seen in most of the films of this genre, which are shown in various ways in different scenarios. In this research, the film *Dark City*, which represents the death of identity in people and the city, is used as a tool and case example to measure the role of identity in creating sustainable places. For this purpose, it is necessary to examine the impact of users' memories and imagination on the city's identity and vice versa, for creating a sustainable city.

This research seeks to answer the following questions:

- What is the role of identity in creating a sustainable place in the *Dark City* movie?
- What are the elements of personal and place identity in the *Dark City* movie?
- How could identity affect place quality and sustainability in the *Dark City* movie?

In this research, it is assumed that individual and social identity have a direct effect on place identity, and places with a special identity are more sustainable. One of the limitations of this research is the lack of access to the producer and writer of the film as the main creators of the film, so for analysing it, based on semiotic theory, different scene and signs of the movie are analyzed to find out the main purpose of the director for presenting it.

### 2. Literature Review

This section presents a synthesis of identity, place, and sustainable place literature from different scientific sources to define special indicators for measuring the identity effect on the city based on the *dark city* movie. It is organised thematically to provide a structured overview of the discourse.

## 2.1. Identity

Identity has emerged as a central concern across multiple disciplines, including psychology (social, developmental, cross-cultural), sociology, anthropology, political theory, and gender studies (Vignoles, 2017; Aziz Amen 2017; Aziz Amen and Ahmad NIA 2021; Aziz Amen and Nia 2018). At its core, identity represents individuals' self-conceptions - their understanding of personal characteristics and social relationships (Hogg & Abrams, 1988, p. 2). This conceptualization serves as a crucial mechanism for both personal distinction and collective differentiation within social contexts (Maudlin, 2009).

The complexity of identity becomes apparent when examining its various theoretical treatments. Erikson's (1968) developmental perspective frames identity formation as a lifelong adaptive process where personal aspirations encounter societal expectations. This view is complemented by McAdams' (2001) narrative approach, which reconceptualizes identity as a dynamic life story rather than a fixed set of traits. From a sociological standpoint, Giddens (1991) argues that modern societies demand continuous identity negotiation amid increasingly fragmented social structures.

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) provides crucial insights into how group memberships (ethnic, national, or otherwise) shape self-perception through intergroup comparisons. Cultural theorists like Hall (1996) extend this understanding by positioning identity as an ongoing social production mediated by historical contexts and power relations. The philosophical roots of these concepts can be traced to Western thinkers, including Descartes, Locke, Hume, and Kant, who variously emphasized the role of personal cognition and experience in self-knowledge (Solomon, 1994).

Environmental psychology contributes the dimension of place identity (Proshansky et al., 1983), demonstrating how physical environments become repositories of personal meaning and collective memory. Importantly, contemporary scholarship recognizes that identity formation never occurs in isolation - rather, it emerges through culturally embedded social connections (Yin, 2018). This interdisciplinary convergence reveals identity's fundamental characteristics: its multi-level nature (spanning individual and collective domains), its developmental trajectory, and its contextual dependence on historical, spatial, and social factors.

According to Peng et al. (2020), identity can be divided into two main parts. People's identity and Place identity. Place identity operates through a dual relationship between people and their environments. While individuals develop personal place identity as part of their self-concept through meaningful place interactions, places themselves acquire identities through human perception and attribution. This reciprocal relationship creates a continuous cycle where:

- Personal Place Identity forms through significant place experiences that shape individual and collective identity.
- Place Personality emerges from physical characteristics, symbolic meanings, and institutional factors that people collectively attribute to locations.
- Dynamic Interaction occurs through mutual influence - places affect identity formation while people actively construct place meanings.

Change Factors like natural events, urban planning, or cultural shifts can alter both place characteristics and residents' place attachments. (Peng, Strijker, & Wu, 2020).

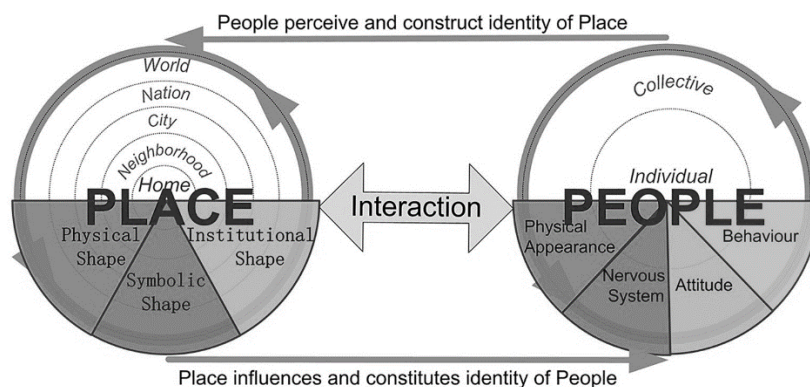


Figure 1. (Peng, Strijker, & Wu, 2020).

### 2.1.1 People identity

One of the most distinctive human traits is self-awareness—the ability to reflect on ourselves and ask, "Who am I?" This self-reflection forms what psychologists call the "self-concept," which encompasses both our unique differences and shared similarities with others (Deaux, 1992). While "self" is a broad, abstract idea, "identity" refers to the specific traits that define who we are as individuals.

Identity is not just a personal matter; it deeply influences our psychology and social interactions. It shapes our decisions, goals, emotions, relationships, and even how we treat different social groups—ultimately affecting both mental and physical well-being (Vignoles, 2017).

people don't form their identities in isolation. Instead, they define themselves partly through the groups they belong to—whether cultural, professional, or geographic. This is known as social identity, which Tajfel (1978) describes as "the part of a person's self-concept that comes from their group memberships, along with the emotional significance of those memberships." in situations of intergroup conflict or prejudice, group identity becomes more

influential in shaping behavior (Hauge, 2007). However, identity is fluid—different aspects become prominent depending on the context, while others may fade into the background.

While social psychology has extensively studied identity, the role of the physical environment has often been overlooked. Yet, research suggests that place is a key factor in identity formation. Twigger-Ross et al. (2003) argue that locations act as social entities, tied to specific cultures, lifestyles, and social classes.

As philosopher Edward Casey (2001) notes, "There is no place without self, and no self without place." Identity is shaped both internally (through personal reflection) and externally (through interactions with our surroundings). Thus, our environment provides the context in which social experiences and personal perceptions merge, helping to mold our sense of self. Identity is a dynamic interplay between personal traits, social belonging, and environmental influences—each contributing to how we understand ourselves and navigate the world.

### 2.1.2 Place Identity

At the start of the twenty-first century, globalization has emerged as a dominant force, often clashing with traditional local identities. This tension intensified as the "international style" spread worldwide, leading many cultures to assert their distinct identities through architecture as a counterbalance (Mahgoub, 2007). Cultural identity—the way people define themselves through shared traditions, values, and symbols—plays a crucial role in this dynamic. Beyond cultural identity, place identity—a person's sense of self tied to physical surroundings—is another key aspect of identity formation. Proshansky (1978) describes it as a cognitive framework shaped by experiences, memories, and emotional connections to locations (Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010). Long-term residents tend to develop stronger place identity than newcomers, as repeated interactions with an environment deepen its significance. According to Paydari and Ramezani (2015), several factors contribute to a place's identity, including:

- Natural and historical elements (landscape, heritage)
- Cultural expressions (festivals, traditions)
- Urban continuity (cohesive public spaces, skyline preservation)
- Balancing development and tradition (unity in diversity)

Places are more than just physical settings—they carry social, emotional, and historical weight. As Relph (1976) argues, understanding a place involves its space, traditions, personal experiences, and social context. Since meanings are constantly renegotiated, no two places contribute to identity in the same way. Hauge (2007) emphasizes that places serve as symbolic anchors, shaping personal and collective memory. Meanwhile, Dixon and Durrheim (2000) describe place identity as a "mental database" that influences how we perceive and interact with environments. This database consists of:

- Memories, values, and experiences tied to specific locations
- Relationships between different settings (e.g., home vs. workplace)

A place's identity is shaped by three interconnected elements (Ehtiyar & Altıntaş, 2012):

1. Distinctive Features – Natural geography, climate, and indigenous materials.
2. Character & Form – Architectural style, urban layout, and visual identity.
3. Meaning – Cultural narratives, historical events, and collective memories tied to the place.

These elements ensure continuity between a city's past and future while reinforcing its uniqueness. Social and economic factors, along with traditional crafts and folklore, further solidify a city's identity within its historical and physical context (Tuncer, 1996).

Generally, identity is not static—it evolves through global influences, cultural heritage, and deep connections to place. Whether through architecture, urban design, or social traditions, the struggle between globalization and local identity continues to shape how communities define themselves in an ever-changing world.

## 2.2. Place and sense of place

The Latin term "Loc," which signifies the location or the site, is the source of the English word "place." While in Greek, the idea of the location had a philosophical underpinning. The first person to employ it was Plato (1937), who saw it as a container for many objects. Aristotle (1952) believed that the location was made up of various elements, pictures, actions, and times. This changed the location from a substance to a content, making it possible to identify the location of an object based on its assumed existence. (Al-Menshawry, El-Sieedy & Abuzekry, 2021) Space, view, tradition, way, other people, personal experience, concern for space, and context for other locations are all components of a place. Understanding a place helps preserve it as it is and inspires the creation of new ones. (Relph, 1976).

The term "sense of place" refers to a person's internal relationship with their surroundings, which involves their mental perception of it and their more or less conscious sensation of it. As a result, their understanding and feeling of the environment merge with its semantic context to form one whole. This sense is a component that, for certain people, changes a place into one with unique sensory and behavioral qualities. In addition to creating a sense of comfort from a place, the sense of place supports the cultural conceptions that people wish to adhere to, the social and cultural relationships of the society in that location, and helps people recall their prior experiences and develop an identity (Falahat, 2005).

The attractiveness and efficiency of the "Canter" model has caused other urban design experts to present various narratives of his model with inspiration or adaptation from it. For example, John Panter's "sense of place" model, which implies the existence of the components involved in creating a sense of place, can be considered one of the sub-narratives of Canter's model. (Punter, 1991).

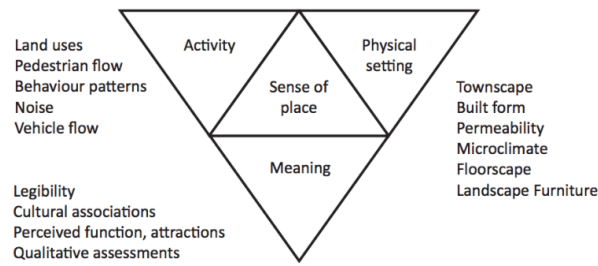


Figure 2. Sense of place model (Punter, 1991).

According to another model developed by Canter, each place is made up of three interconnected dimensions: the "physical portion," the "activities," and the "perceptions." (Canter, 1977)

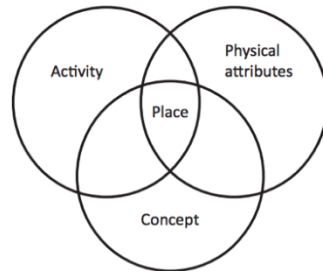


Figure 3. place model (Canter, 1997).

These two models are so close to each other and it can be interpreted from them that place formation is equal with sense of place formation because if there is an environment or space that can be called as a place, it will definitely have connection with users and their perception. In an other word, if a place does not have any meaning and sense for its users, it is a space not a place. In 2018, Gokce& Chen created a new model with more details to explain the most important elements that can increase sense of place. (Gokce& Chen,2018)

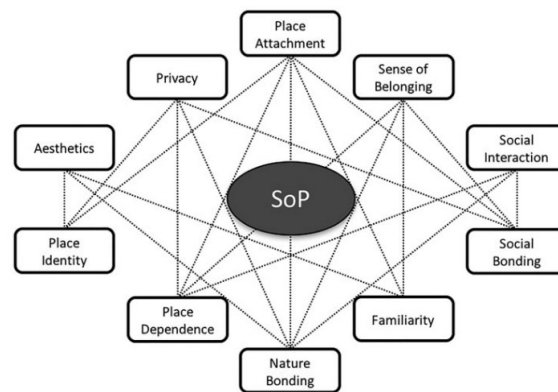


Figure 4. (Gokce& Chen,2018).

### 2.5. Sustainable place

Sustainable places are not merely environmentally conscious spaces but are deeply tied to social equity, economic resilience, and cultural continuity (Beatley, 2017). Research by Farr (2008) emphasizes that sustainable urban design must integrate ecological principles while fostering community identity, ensuring that development does not erode local character. Similarly, Wheeler (2013) highlights the importance of adaptive reuse and regenerative design in maintaining historical and ecological integrity during urban transitions. Studies also indicate that successful, sustainable placemaking requires participatory planning, where residents actively shape their environments to reflect shared values and long-term sustainability goals (Lennon, 2022). This shift from traditional to sustainable spaces thus represents a holistic reimagining of how human settlements interact with natural systems and cultural heritage.

Place significantly affects how we view the world. Place "a built or natural landscape, holding a unique geographical location, endowed with meaning." is a "multidimensional notion." A place can be considered to contain location (i.e., the physical location), locale (i.e., the setting for daily activities), sense of place (i.e., how people perceive the actual area), as well as a larger context (local institutions and ecosystems). in other words, Sustainability is not "placeless" ( LUEDERITZ & JOHN, 2015)

In 1997, Golkar used two models of PLACE (Canter) and SENSE OF PLACE (Punter) to introduce a new model to define a sustainable place. In this research, he pointed out the lack of attention to the ecological and environmental

dimension and believes that by adding the ecological dimension to Canter's "place model", the indicators of a sustainable place can be identified. (Golkar,1997)

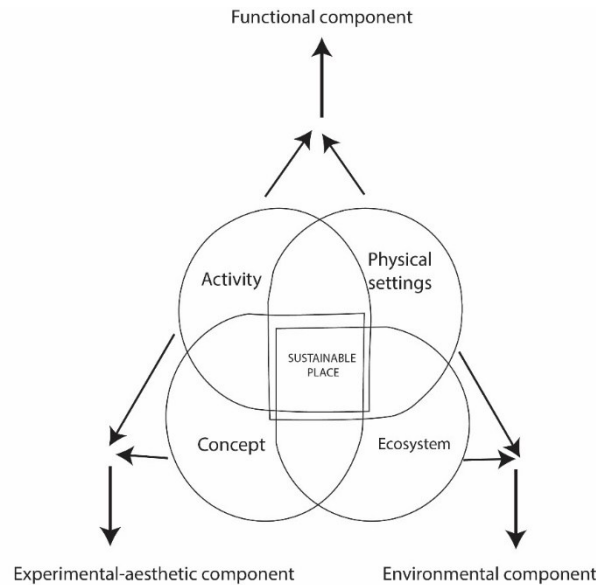


Figure 1. Sustainable place model (Golkar, 1997).

In his model, he is summarizing the whole model into three components, such as functional component, experimental-aesthetic component, and environmental component, and defines indicators of each component which is summarized in this table:

**Table Error! No text of specified style in document.-1:** Sustainable place components and indicators (Golkar,1997).

components	indicators
Functional component	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ The compatibility of the urban form with users, the pedestrian network, the cycling network, the information network, etc. - The quality of gathering places (activity, time, and space compatibility).</li> <li>✓ Environmental quality in terms of safety for activities</li> <li>✓ Environmental quality and activity security</li> </ul>
Experimental-aesthetic component	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Spatial structure, physical organization, places for exploration, Solid-Void, the Noli map, materials, and other characteristics are included in the quality of "physical-spatial environment" (objective environment).</li> <li>✓ The quality of the objective perspective, an examination of the urban view's structure.</li> <li>✓ The quality of the "mental perceptual environment" (cognitive environment), includes the geographical and temporal quality of the cognitive landscape, concrete meanings, vitality.</li> </ul>
Environmental component	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ The microclimate (climatic comfort) of metropolitan areas, which includes factors like wind, humidity, wind protection, and sun exposure.</li> <li>✓ The standard of the environment's noises, scents, and fragrances - The standard of sustainable urban architecture - The effectiveness of the use of natural resources (energy, land, etc.)</li> <li>✓ The health of ecosystems</li> <li>✓ Decreased pollution (air, land, water)</li> </ul>

Emphasizing the various dimensions of Gulkar’s model illustrates that achieving sustainability is inherently linked to the realization of a sustainable city across multiple domains. However, given that the focus of this research is on identity and memory, integrating sustainable place indicators with those related to sense of place and identity can yield a more contextually relevant set of indicators for addressing this issue.

**3. Materials and Methods**

Cinema offers a dynamic platform for expressing and analyzing complicated social, psychological, and spatial concepts. Films frequently mirror and reinterpret urban life, making them valuable materials for scholars studying the connection between the city and personal identity. A film like Dark City can be used as a distinct case study for this research to explore the ways spaces influence, disrupt, or even erase individual identity. In such narratives, the city is portrayed not merely as a setting but as an active agent that shapes and engages with the characters’ understanding of themselves.

Dark City was made in 1998 by Alex Proyas and is included in the category of science fiction films. Fundamentally, Dark City examines memory, identity, and what makes us human within a somber, atmospheric background. Memory is the capacity of an individual to retain and recall information. As a result, the foundation of learning is

memory, which serves as a mental archive of information. A person won't be able to accomplish anything, not even the most basic optional actions like eating, dressing, speaking, and the like, if recollection can be deleted from their life. (Audi, 1998: p56) Despite this, memory is the preserver of knowledge rather than the creator of human knowledge. In reality, memory only stores beliefs acquired from information sources so that they can be recalled at a later time. The continuity provided by memory allows us to connect our current experience to coherent images from the past. These visions might not be rational or true, yet they nonetheless exist. Experience is fragmented without memory's unifying power, just as existence is made up of moments. (Alami sola, Kohansal & moghimi, 2017)

The story of this movie centers on John Murdoch, who wakes up memoryless in a hotel bathtub and discovers the city he lives in is weird as he attempts to remember his past: the city is always night, people appear to change their identities without noticing, and the city's layout changes inexplicably. After John struggles with aliens, he vanquishes them and transforms the city into a place of hope and light.

The type of this research from the viewpoint of application, enquiry mode, and objectives is applied, qualitative, and descriptive research. The method of this research is a semiotic study. Semiotics pursues the goal of recognizing and analyzing signs and symbols, whether they are in the form of spoken or written language or those that have non-linguistic forms, including physiological and biological signs, semantic systems, value systems, symbolic symbols, various worldviews and even all forms of movement, state, situation, conscious or unconscious, tactical, strategic, thought or not, etc. Semiotic analysis explores how signs and symbols generate meaning. It stems from the discipline of semiotics, which has its foundations in linguistics and philosophy, and was significantly shaped by the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce.

In this research, sustainable place indicators are studied based on this method in order to discover the importance of identity on the nature of place in different historical periods of time. In the first part of this research, a theoretical investigation on the concept of identity, place, and sustainable place has been conducted. The indicators extracted from the sustainable place, place, and identity have been formed next to each other, and according to the case sample, the desired indices have been selected for this study, and then, according to the semiotic method. From all indicators, the ones that are closer to identity and also special signs in the movie have been selected to examine the role of identity in creating a sustainable city.

<b>components</b>	<b>sustainable place</b>	<b>Sense of place</b>	<b>Identity</b>	
<b>Functional component</b>	✓ compatibility of activity, time, and space	✓ Land use	✓ consistency and continuity of public spaces	
	✓ The quality of urban form compatibility with users (pedestrian network, riding network,	Pedestrian flow	✓ Cultural performance and entertainment	
	✓ Safety quality of the environment for activities	Behavior patterns	✓ the structure; the materials employed	
	✓ Quality of environmental security for activities	Noise	the shape and picture created by the employment of fulls and blanks	
		Vehicle flow		
		✓ Social interaction		
		✓ privacy		
		✓ Social bonding		
	<b>Experimental-aesthetic component</b>	The quality of "physical-spatial environment" (objective environment) includes spatial ossification, physical organization, Place of exploration, solid-void, Noli map, materials, and etc.	✓ Legibility	continuity while developing
		✓ The quality of the structure of the urban view	✓ Cultural associations	✓ maintaining unity in diversity
✓ vitality		Perceived function	✓ Folklore and traditional crafts	

		✓ Attractions	
		Qualitative assessments	
		✓ familiarity	
		✓ aesthetics	
<b>Environmental component</b>	✓ Microclimate quality of urban spaces: sun exposure, shading, wind, humidity, etc.	✓ Townscape	line of sky and the wall
	✓ The quality of sounds, smells and aromas of the environment	✓ Built form	✓ natural features created by the terrain, geology, and plant cover
	The quality of sustainable urban design	✓ Permeability	The region's climate
	Efficiency of consumption of natural resources (energy, land, etc.)	Microclimate	
	Reducing pollution (air, land, water)	Floorscape	
	✓ Balance of ecosystems	✓ Landscape furniture	
		✓ Nature bounding	

The selected indicators (with a mark sign) are evaluated in the movie (Dark City), and images related to them are taken from the movie. In the end, the questions of this research have been answered according to the three main dimensions of sustainable place.

#### 4. Analysis and Discussion









Dark City is a movie about lost identities, distorted memories, and manipulated emotions. It is about a city whose texture, architecture, and history are easy to restore, enter, and occupy, like its inhabitants. The story follows John Murdoch, who wakes up in a hotel with no memory and soon realizes he's suspected of a series of murders that he can't remember committing. While he is trying to find his lost identity, he realizes the city he lives in is under the control of mysterious, otherworldly beings known as the strangers or aliens. The Aliens created a city (dystopia) and moved humans to this city to investigate the soul of humans. They use some scientific methods with the help of a doctor to delete memories of all people, and every day they give people some memories and identity from another person to analyze their behavior. Based on this character change, the form of the city also changes, and each night, the city has a different form.



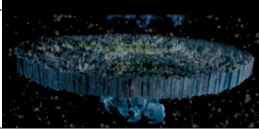









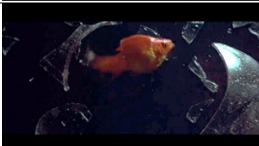
In terms of time and setting, Dark City connects 1940s film noir with science fiction, placing its story in a dystopian world where aliens have constructed a false reality on the foundation of an old, timeless city. In this weird city, everything and everyone are being stopped every midnight, and they receive a new character and identity after that. A flaw in the existing system results in Murdoch, the main male character of the story. He is not able to sleep at midnight and realizes that the city takes on a new shape every night, and a new memory is injected into its residents. Murdoch gradually discovers he has the same ability as aliens, and he becomes a threat to the Strangers' plans. The film explores themes of identity, memory, and reality, culminating in Murdoch confronting the Strangers and reshaping the city according to his will.

Like many science fiction films, Dark City begins with the prehistory of another decaying civilization. The dark city is a futuristic place with artificial skyscrapers, outdated in terms of architectural and decorative styles, and reminiscent of the forties and fifties. The fact that the city of this artificial and lived environment changes every day reflects the lack of memory and identity. In a metaphorical reading, the film raises the question of how human memories can be preserved in the onslaught of urban changes and virtual reality.

Murdoch emerges as the ultimate victor in the battle against the alien Strangers. When the sun finally rises—a symbol of truth and renewal—it marks the end of deception and the beginning of clarity. The human mind, tired of lies, manipulation, and artificial reality, begins to rebel and seek authenticity. Murdoch, reclaiming his identity, recreates a peaceful and beautiful place—a beach and pier—where a woman (Anna) waits for him. This ending, like a scene from a postcard, represents hope and fulfillment, mirroring the memory Murdoch brings to life. Dark City also reflects themes from modern history. Its references to modernity can be seen not only in the film's urban architecture and visual style, but also in the costumes, interior designs, and even the name of Dr. Schreber. The name is a nod to Daniel Paul Schreber, a real historical figure and patient of Sigmund Freud, who was known for his writings on paranoia and mental illness.

A crucial aspect of Dark City is that the entire city is an artificial, floating structure in space. In one pivotal scene, Detective Bumstead and John Murdoch break through a wall that supposedly leads to Shell Beach—a place everyone "remembers" but no one has ever actually visited. Instead of finding the expected ocean, they encounter the vast emptiness of space, exposing the shocking truth: the city isn't on Earth but is instead an isolated, man-made construct drifting in the void. This reveals that the environment is entirely fabricated, and the residents' memories—including those of places like Shell Beach—have been artificially implanted to maintain the illusion of a normal world.

components	indicators	City under the control of the aliens	
Functional component	compatibility of activity, time, space	Dark and rainy streets High-rise buildings	
	Compatibility of the pedestrian network, the riding network with users	Using main roads as the pedestrian way by users The existence of an underground city for the Aliens A well-defined Pier	
	Safety quality of the environment for activities	murder of some sex workers and putting a special sign of Labyrinth on their chest  Dark and empty streets that feel like an unsafe place  The presence of a child in a public space, the Strangers' demise	
	Land use	Closed commercial places Hotels Medical/Institutional buildings Police Station	
	Social interaction	Warm and romantic conversation between Murdoch and his wife after the Strangers' demise	
	privacy	Frizing time and changing people's identity without their awareness	
	Social bonding	An empty city without any social interaction	
	consistency and continuity of public spaces	Labyrinthine form of the city that makes continuity	

Experimental-aesthetic component	The quality of the structure of the urban view/ Townscape	High-rise townscape without identity	
	vitality	No sign of an active city except car traffic	
	Legibility	Labyrinthine structure of the city without legibility	
	Cultural associations	Bar and music performance	
	familiarity	Shell Beach building as the same place that everyone remembers its name	
Environmental component	Folklore and traditional crafts	Finding some photos and jewelries from the parents after the Strangers' demise	
	Microclimate quality of urban spaces: sun exposure, shading, wind, humidity, etc.	Showing the sun after breaking the wall of the Shell Beach building	
	The quality of sounds, smells and aromas of the environment	Silence in the public spaces	
	Built form	Labyrinthine form of the city	
	Permeability	The winding structure of the city	
	Landscape furniture	A telephone kiosk Clocks Bridges and Piers	
	Nature bounding	floating structure of city in space	
	Balance of ecosystems	a dead fish reviving life	

natural features created by the terrain, geology, and plant cover

rowing a small boat through the underground water system



Based on the signs which was found in the movie with special attention to Sustainable city and identity, in this part, each sign is analyzed with the semiotic method to read them from another point of view. To make it short and summarize, all analyses are shown in table below.

<b>Dimention</b>	<b>Signs in the movie</b>	<b>Semiotic reading</b>
Functional component (Physical-Activity)	Futuristic architecture with lots of towers, elevators etc.	Modernism, the industrial revolution, and physical changes in cities in terms of improving people's life quality
	Mix of past and future architecture	Death of identity
	The face of the city is similar to America in 50th	As a symbol of utopia, which is lost, and people want to come back to that period
	Labyrinth city	Internal lostness (spiritual conflict) and the death of identity and memory
	the city is floating in space	disconnected from Earth and reality a place where reality, history, and personal identity are all manipulated
	Killing woman	No safety in the modern period because of identity death and minimal social interaction between people dehumanization and instrumentalization of human life
	Dark and empty streets	No social interaction between people No identity and memory No feeling in the space
	Telephone kiosk	Disconnection with reality and control, and monitoring of human
	Bridge and piers	The threshold between two realms—urban vs. unknown, reality vs. illusion no outside world, no exit—only the illusion of freedom
	Shell Beach	False Memory and Manufactured Reality An idealized escape from the dark, oppressive city hope, freedom, or the possibility of truth How modern cities can disconnect people from nature, history, or authenticity.
Experimental-aesthetic component (Activity-Concept-Social-Emotional)	Human fingerprints	The difference between people is like the difference between fingerprints, and not paying attention to it in the modern age
	Dr. Daniel.P.Scharber	One of Freud's famous patients who suffered from paranoia (conspiracy delusion) had the same name, which refers to the psychological aspects of modern times.
	Deleting people's memories	Death of identity
	Bar and music performance	Both the bar and music scenes are carefully staged illusions, reinforcing that the city is a theater where humans perform roles written by the Strangers
	Same-shape aliens without emotions and identity	Modernism and the homogenization of people and the death of emotion and identity
	Killing 6 prostitutes	The number 6 is a symbol of evil and a prostitute is a symbol of social delinquency Killing a prostitute (rather than solving a social problem) equals destroying all past identity in order to improve the quality of life
	Building a new city with stolen memories	The failure of modernism to create a new era and improve people's quality of life
	The discovery of personal items such as photographs and jewelry	reconnection with their identities and histories Personal memories and relationships underscore the film's central themes of memory, identity, and the human experience

	Romantic conversation between Murdoch and his wife after the Strangers' demise	reunion, emotional healing, and new beginnings
Environmental component (Physical-Ecosystem)	Sea as hope in the movie	Emancipation from oneself or annihilation and attaining the highest truth And also due to the fear of aliens from water, water is shown as a symbol of anti-extraterrestrials
	Always night and no sun	Darkness in modernism is because of no identity and a sense of place
	Start of the movie with showing Merdak in a tub of water	Due to the fear of aliens from water, water is shown as a symbol of anti-extraterrestrials, and the man is who will save the world and take back the city from them
	Fish as the only non-human living creatures	Short memory Giving back life
Technical (movie making)	Filmmaking in noir style, showing dark and wet streets	Dissatisfaction with the modern era and the darkness of this era

The selected indicators were identified within the film and reinterpreted through a semiotic lens. The narrative structure of *Dark City* can be divided into two distinct phases: the period under alien control and the period following their demise. These two phases symbolically correspond to modernism and postmodernism, respectively, as reflected in their distinct semiotic characteristics. Analyzing the movie signs with special attention to the concept of a sustainable place, shows that the film portrays an urban environment devoid of both personal identity (rooted in individual memory and emotion) and place identity (which is typically shaped by cultural and social continuity). As such, the city depicted in the film fails to align with the principles of sustainable urbanism, particularly those that emphasize the importance of identity, memory, emotional connection, and human-centered design.

## 5. Conclusion

By analyzing the criteria of sustainable place with particular emphasis on identity and sense of place, the film *Dark City* reveals how the modern era has witnessed the erosion of place identity, largely due to the destruction of both individual and social identity. This loss has contributed to the decline of urban sustainability across multiple dimensions. Modernist approaches, characterized by a rationalist and homogenizing view of the world, often neglected human emotions and the nuanced fabric of social life. In contrast, *Dark City* critiques this paradigm by highlighting love, memory, and emotional connection as redemptive forces, thereby aligning itself with postmodern perspectives that advocate for the reintegration of vitality, individuality, and social interaction into urban life.

Personal identity is constructed through accumulated memories, shaped by relationships, experiences, and places from childhood to the present. Similarly, the identity of a city is inherently tied to the identities of its inhabitants, which are influenced by cultural, religious, familial, and historical contexts. The relationship between personal and urban identity is mutual: each shapes and reflects the other. The city is not an entity separate from its residents; rather, it is a living representation of their lives and experiences. Consequently, the weakening of social conditions is mirrored in the urban environment, and top-down changes imposed without consideration of the lived experiences of residents risk rendering the city lifeless, devoid of both social cohesion and meaningful spatial interaction.

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## Conflict of Interests

The Author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest.

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