CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: The Study of Collective Memory in Public Squares

The paradox of collective memory in contemporary writing argues that it is the complex social phenomenon that in turn alters our perception of urban public spaces with its positive and negative factors. In this study, collective memory refers to the shared memories of inhabitants about their shared past and expressions they made when remembering buildings, spaces and places of the past and present city living (Halbwach, 1992). The collective memory in relation to public square is the consideration to its key role in revitalizing and creating memorable urban public squares which leads to strengthen the sense of community and sense of belonging.

It is a seeming paradox that the balance between society and built environment has a constant change as we evolve repeatedly, and our collective identity mean to facilitate new public spaces to boost our public life, as well re-shaping existing spaces. Even though urban designing and planning play wider role of this evolving procedure, sometimes some proposed design does not respond to the vital role of public spaces and unknowingly break the relationship between man and his environment incorporating novel attributes. For example, revitalizing and retrofitting of public squares seems extremely sensitive as it inevitably affects the habits of people, and their behaviors directly and indirectly by confusing and troubling them (Levy, 2010). Because for them these spaces are parts of their collective memory and thus these spaces mean a little world, for them to remember forever (Halbwachs, 1950).

Therefore, there is a strong link between what we design today with the past. Hewison argues that, “The impulse to preserve the past is part of the impulse to preserve the self. Without knowing where we have been, it is difficult to know where we are going. The past is the foundation of individual and collective identity; objects from the past are the source of significance as cultural symbols. Continuity between past and present creates a sense of sequence out of chaos and, since change is inevitable, a stable system of ordered meaning enables us to cope with both innovation and decay”. (Hewison, 1987). People need to experience the feel of attached memories underneath them while they are moving, perceiving through these public spaces. Because it is nostalgia, rather than physical attributes, that plays a vital role in
driving people to these public spaces. Therefore, it is very important to understand how people respond to public spaces, their behavior and their perception, which in turn might help urban designers, planners and architects to design better and memorable ones.

1.1 Research Problem and Questions
This research focuses on the reasons behind underutilized or declined public squares, and an analysis of collective memory will be emphasized, especially in terms of its influence on the public squares, hence, how people shape public squares with their past experience and nostalgia in the city. However, Collective memory discourse has been used in different studies, in different perspectives, diverse form of nationalism in history and political science to views of ritualization and commemoration in anthropology and sociology (Wilson, 2005). It is rarely explored that how it can be used in architecture or urban regeneration projects of collective memory today as well in relation to public spaces.

Public squares can be found in every major city in the world and it is regarded as the heart and soul of urban life. Cities such as New York City, Madrid, Amsterdam, Houston, Istanbul, Pittsburgh, Rome, San Francisco, and São Paulo, has world’s greatest public squares and which seems to have great sense of place and sense of belonging (PPS). Public squares have a vital role to play in the cities by connecting various elements, offering wide range of activities and it happened to be the starting point for all community, retail business and social activities. And they are favorite places to meet, talk, sit, relax, stroll, socialize and juxtapose (Webb, 1990). At least that’s the theory and that’s how it should be. So the main research questions are;

Why people are abandoning and neglecting some important and historically significant public squares? How do these underutilized public squares can affect public collective memory? How sense of collective memory in terms of accumulation is necessary in revitalizing and creating memorable urban public squares?

The collective memory which we built through public squares has a powerful and influential contribution to construct ideology and identity as well the history of the society rather than the geometry and shape of the squares and physical appearance and attributes (Levy, 2010). Since
the collective memory is something intangible, and therefore it is easier to appreciate collective memory by its absence and rather than its presence. For example, the decline and emptiness of public squares signifies that lack of collectivity and sense community keeping away people from this spaces. Hence, this research is generally based on certain ideas such as the way people respond to public squares and how these squares in turn influence to construct our ideology and identity (e.g., design, accessibility, attractiveness, etc.). Influence our understandings of the world, our identities, our attitudes toward others, and our politics (Massey, 2005). However, there have been some limited efforts in using collective memory for facilitating urban regeneration projects or representing collective memory in architectural spaces or public places.

1.2 Aim of the research
The main aim of this study is to investigate how collective memory can be used in revitalizing underutilized or abandoned public squares, which plays a vital role in shaping and constructing our culture, ideology and identity as a whole. This study will evaluate the collective memory in both ways, in terms of it effectiveness as driving force to shape public squares as well decline of public squares.

For this purpose, the research addressed these objectives: -

1) To identify the reasons why some urban squares are neglected and abandoned by its people.
2) To argue that collective memory shapes public squares, where changes (for example; neglecting, abandoning) in the public squares, in turn influence to the public collective memory.
3) To investigate how the revitalization of public squares effectively take into account the collective memory responses to achieving successful urban public squares.

1.3. Structure of the Dissertation
The first chapter will introduce research question, aim of the study and outlines the methods which were used in this research, and the limitation of the study.

The second chapter will be discussing on, Public Square and Collective Memory, definitions and its relation to public spaces.
The third chapter intent to understand the diverse and complex relationship of collective memory and Public Squares and how the space is perceived, defined, limited, and produced differently by the user and their behaviors.

The fourth chapter will explore the case study and portray research findings. From the examination of case study and qualitative and quantitative research methods the fifth chapter will discuss about the key ideas.

The sixth or the final chapter will conclude the research. This chapter presents the conclusion from the previous chapters and as well as recommendations and suggestions for the research.

1.4. Method of the Study
This study made use of mixed methodology in relation to the theoretical concepts of collective memory formulated through literature review to see how sense of collective memory is important in activating underutilized public squares. The methodologies adopted for the study are as follows and will be discussed later in the research.

- Preliminary Observation / Visual Documentation
- User Survey
- Interview with community focused group

1.5. Scope and Limitation of the study
This research study is focused on physical attributes, social aspects and sensory experience of public squares that influence to the transformation of the squares. The study limits the users and socio-cultural setting in the surroundings of the one of the largest and historically significant public spaces in Male’ Republican Square, the square is one of the historically significant public square which emerged during 19th century.