



Between sense and attachment: Comparing the concepts of place in architectural studies

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Abstract

Contemporary architecture and urban design studies are abound with place concepts such as place attachment, sense of place, meaning of place, and place identity drawing much inspiration from the literature of environmental psychology. Despite the nuanced differences, all these concepts focus on various aspects of human-place interactions particularly the impact of places on people. This paper delineates the differing concepts regarding the sense of place and place attachment and explains the factors that affect them. It discovers from different studies that place attachment is a subset of place sense. Sense of place is a comprehensive concept of how people feel about particular places, perceive them and attached meanings to them the understanding of which is vital in assessing the level and tendency of public attachment to particular places. Place attachment refers to positive emotional and functional bonds between places and people at different spatial scales signifying the varied interplays of spatial, environmental and human factors.

Keywords: architecture, concepts of place, environmental psychology, place, place attachment, sense of place

Introduction

Over the past 20 years researches were investigating the impact of place on people and their quality of life (Scott, 1989). In some studies the prevalence of depression, grief and emotional damages caused by placelessness had been pointed out as the result of the lack of people attention in the management of space (Read, 1996). Nonetheless, in recent years changes in lifestyles have turned the attention of architects, designers and planners to the environment in response to greater human expectations about the built environment. Increasingly, the concept of sense of place has been investigated in geography, architecture and urban design.

Two concepts of place have been widely researched. One is the concept of 'sense of place' which connotes different meanings in the fields of sociological, cultural and psychological sciences depicting the complexities that researches encounter with respect to such issues as the sense and perception of place, identity, and social attachments. Sense of place is a factor that converts the space into a place with special behavioural and emotional characteristics for individuals.

The other is the concept of place attachment which preoccupies researches in the last 25 years. Here, various factors such as personal space, territory, function of space for groups, and the meaning of place were examined (Low and Altman, 1992) with ever increasing attention to the impact of culture on places, design effects of on the elderly, children, homeless people and various other social groups, and on place attachment issues such as ownership (Belk, 1992), childhood memories (Boschetti, 1987; Marcus, 1992; Chalwa, 1992), and differential scales of place from home to neighborhood (Thompson, Fullilove, 1996).

Given the growing importance of these two concepts and their proliferation in architecture and urbanism literature, this paper examines the parameters that define and affect them.

Place in literature

Environmental psychologists and human geographers study the relationship between places and human emotions. Some scholars believe that place has been created in emotional relationship between people and places through routine human daily life experiences. This is known as the phenomenology of place. Each geographical place has a character and spirit that is related to its natural properties. Yet, place becomes signified only with human existence for place without people is only a geographical location. Tuan (1990) calls this sense of place *topophilia* which emphasises not just a visual experience of place but all emotional and cognitive senses of place (Tuan, 1979). Reduction of the concept of place to mere symbolic meanings has prevented some practitioners of contemporary architecture from addressing this organic and experiential sense of place. Attachment to a place happens when people have a positive sense about it and when it becomes important for them (Seamon, 2008). The attachment may become affective after prolonged experience of the place resulting in an emotional bond with it (Low & Altman, 1992).

In some studies the quality of place resulting from personal value judgment about physical properties of place is used in contrast with placelessness (Victhealth, 1999). In general, however, place is taken to denote all individual and socio-cultural processes that create it (Low&Altman,1992). In fact people change space to place based on their social bonds, feeling and emotions (Stedman, 2003a). A place thus combines all three attributes of geographical location, physical parameters and value identity (Gieryn, 2000) or alternatively, of formal characters, activities inside it and their meanings (Relph, 1976 & Canter, 1977). Nevertheless, a place is formed by a social process derived from social interactions and activities within it and thus plays an effective role in the promotion of social ties such as in urban communities (Loomrs & Singer, 1980). In this regard, place is a container for cultural, social and individual relationships (Low & Altman,1992).

Forms of interaction between humans and places

In general, interaction between humans and places occur in three dimensions: Cognitive, behavioural and emotional (Table 1). The cognitive aspects pertain to the formal aspects of spatial perceptions during which people know the environmental elements of the place and use them to navigate their way (Long, 1938). Behavioral aspects refer to the functional aspects of activities and functional relationship between people and environment (Amedeo et al, 2009), while emotional aspects point to people’s satisfactory emotional experiences of a place and the resultant attachment to it which can be so strong (Low & Altman, 1992).

Table 1. Different aspects of human interaction with the environment and its association with different components of places

	Type of relationship	Details of relationship	Place components
Interaction between humans and places	Cognitive	General perception in order to understand the geometry of space and orientation	Form
	Behavioural	Perception of space capabilities to obviate the needs	Function
	Emotional	Perception of satisfaction and attachment to place	Meaning

Different scales of human interaction with place

Shamai defines five scales for places which demonstrate sense of place in association with an individual. First, the scale of meanings in which a place makes a felt difference. Second, the scale of purposes that a place serves. Third, the scale of the individual’s continuity of blending with a place. Fourth, the scale of being in place which relates to the individual’s actual behaviour there. Finally, the scale of sacrifice which denotes the highest level of sense of place that emanates from the individual’s deepest commitment to a place to the extent that he forgoes his larger interests for its sake (Shamai, 1991).

Cross (2001) defined sense of place as a combination of the relationships between place and social activities, which can be clustered as biographical, spiritual, ideological, narrative, commoditized and dependent. Hummon (1992) noted that people’s satisfaction, identification, and attachment to communities caused different kinds of sense of place, namely, rootedness, alienation, relativity, and placelessness.

Categorizing different approaches to the concept of place

Three approaches to the concept of place may be discerned from the available literature: phenomenological, critical and positivist (Lalli, 1992). Most studies were influenced by the phenomenology of place based on Husserl (1983) although it is often accused of subjectivism which rendered it unable to form generalizations. In contrast is the positive approach which focus on behavioural studies to form general and quantitative theories about individual experiences of place (Table 2).

Table 2. Categories of approaches in relation to place

Approaches	Main considerations		Theorists
Phenomenological	The spirit of place, the concept of inside and outside, cognitive	Subjective	Norberg-Schulz, Relph
Critical	consideration of economic and socio-cultural structures	-	Messy
Positive	Addressing to physical and functional components of place	objective	Canter

Sense of place

The term of sense of place has diverse implications in the field of geographical, sociological, cultural and psychological researches. The complex inter-relations of perception, identity, social attachments and other things psychological have made its study difficult. Sense of place changes a typical space to a place of special behavioural and sensory characteristics for certain people which may be captured by understanding their everyday activities and related symbolisms (Relph, 1976). Individual and collective values exert influence on the sense of place which in turn influence their behaviour and social values and attitudes. People usually participate in social activities according to their sense of place (Canter, 1977).

Sense of place encapsulates the complex relationship, associations and interplay between man’s subjective experiences of people (memories, traditions, history, culture, and society) and the objective influences of the external environment (landscape, smell, sound, etc.). This means that sense of place is not predetermined but created from people - places interactions .

Factors forming a sense of place

Because it enmeshes human subjects with their physical environment sense of place is both a psychological and physical concept where the relationship between people and place is mutual. People

take different impressions (positive or negative) from a place and then convey their meaning to it. Thus as manifested in the literature, factors creating a sense of place are cognitive- perceptual and physical characteristic of the place (Steele, 1981) (Figure 1).

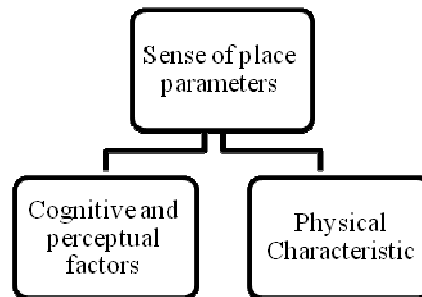


Figure 1. *Sense of place factors (Steele, 1981)*

In this regard, cognitive factors include the meanings which people percept from a place. So sense of place is not just an emotional sense but also a cognitive structure to which a person gives or links his meanings. As a result of people’s different experiences, motivations, intellectual background, and the environment’s physical characteristics (size, scale, components, diversity, texture, decoration, colour, odour, noise, temperature, etc), different senses (feelings, beliefs, functions) of place are created (Jorgensen, 2001). Thus following Canter (1977) the creative form, function and meaning elements of a place correspond to the cognitive, behavioral and emotional dimensions of the sense of place. Identity, history, fun, mysterious, pleasant, wonderful, security, vitality and memory also have certain effects on the way people communicate with places (Steele, 1981). By understanding all this a cognitive connection with place is formed (Figure 2).

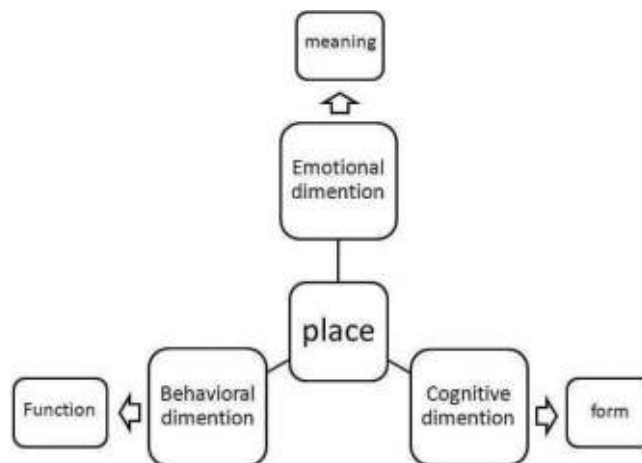


Figure 2. *Dimensions of place creation (Jorgensen, 2001; Canter, 1977)*

Different scales of sense of place

Sense of place has different levels (Stedman, 2002) and according to Hummon (1992) these include rootedness, alienation, relativity, and placelessness . Cross (2001) chose to define sense of place as a combination of place relationship with social activities which he clustered as biographical, spiritual, ideological, narrative, commoditized and dependent. Shamai’s , however, conceived of a seven tier sense

of place proceeding from sense of belonging to a place, to place attachment and place commitment (Shamai, 1991):

1. Knowledge of being located in a place. At this level people are familiar with the place; they identify the symbols of the place but do not have any particular emotional connection to them. Therefore, they have not integrated themselves with the place.
2. Belonging to a place. In this phase people not only are familiar with the place but have an emotional connection with it. Here, people distinguish the symbols of the place and in contrast to the previous stage those respect them.
3. Attachment to a place. At this level people have a strong emotional relationship with the place. The place is meaningful and significant to them and has developed a unique symbolic identity and character to the users.
4. Identifying with the place goals. At this level, people are integrated with the place in the sense that the goals of the place are recognizable by them. As users become very satisfied with these goals they develop a deep attachment to the place.
5. Involvement in a place. This is the level where people have an active role in the place. They are willing to invest their own resources such as money, time, or talent in the activities of the place. Thus in contrast to previous levels that were mostly based on attitude, this stage pertains to the real manners of the people.
6. Sacrifice for a place. This final level is also the pinnacle of sense of place as the deepest commitment to a place is its main aspect. At this stage people are willing to make sacrifice of important attributes and values such as prosperity, freedom, or life itself for the sake of the place.

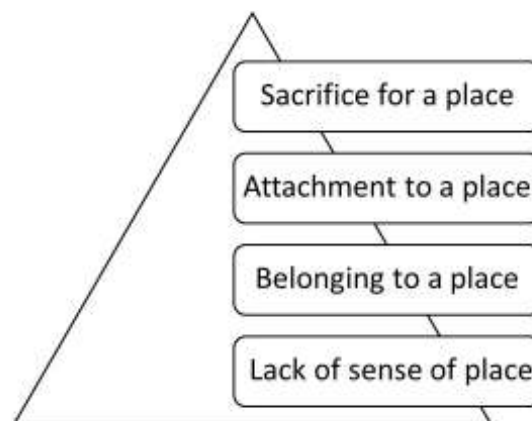


Figure 3. Different scales of sense of place (Shamai,1991)

Place attachment

Place attachment is a symbolic relationship with a place which is formed by giving emotional meanings and common sense to a particular place or territory (Low & Altman, 1992). It is a positive dimension of total place sensitivity and emotional attachment that an individual develops for a place (Stedman, 2003), depicting his positive beliefs and emotions in interacting and ascribing meaning to it (Rubinstein & Parmelee, 1992). Place attachment rate is directly related to place interest; the more attached an individual is to a place, the more he cares about it (Mesch & Monar, 1992). This is manifested in his activities, feelings, knowledge, beliefs and behaviours with regard to that place (Relph,1976; Low & Altman, 1992; Proshansky et al, 1992).

Nonetheless, it is important to note that place attachment may actually be caused by a person's sense of belonging to society at a certain place rather than his mere devotion to place (Kyle et al, 2004). In this case, it is social attachment that leads to place sensitivity as may be found in neighborhood units where

social groups, physical appropriateness, individual personality and perceived position of the place play important roles (Shumaker & Taylor, 1983; Low & Altman, 1992). Such attachment may develop consciously or unconsciously (Brown & Perkins, 1992) depending on how people judge, prefer and understand or perceive a place (Riley, 1992).

Place attachment depicts a deep human characteristic as when regarding a place an individual express "I belong to it." And thus he gives it a home identity (Rivlin, 1987).

Affective factors of place attachment

A literature review about place attachment identifies several factors influencing the creation and fostering of place attachment:

a. Physical factors

Both physical and social features play the same roles in creating place attachment. Stedman (2003b) studied physical place role on place attachment and pointed to its direct role in place satisfaction and its indirect role in place attachment. Other features that have been indicated include place setting and bed, facility and services, place status in urban setting, and its relationship to environment and other features.

b. Social factors

Positive relationship between a physical place and personal satisfaction is related to social communications that facilitate the meaningfulness of the place to individuals. Thus the importance of place attachment based on people participation, social network engagement and cultural interactions must never be ignored. Place attachment develops with people positive interaction and social compatibility in place and its power is directly related to the intensity of these social relations.

c. Cultural factors

Cultural factors play an important role in place preference where groups, families and society members and similar cultures are common in place attachment. Place attachment related to those activities that people do in their cultural requirement setting (Newell, 1997).

d. Personal factors

Place attachment differs from person to person. People select and attach to place due to their conscious tendencies that result from personal characteristics and factors. Individualism is an important factor in influencing an individual's social orientation: how based on his initial tendencies he develops mental identities that foster intimate social communication. Place reflects identities, differences and competitions of and in different groups based not just on gender, class, race, ethnic, and culture but also individual political tendencies, power, liberty, social system and common interests in consumption motives.

e. Memories and experiences

Place attachment took place when people experienced powerful, long period of time in a place that it becomes a vast repository of meanings. Thus as a factor of place attachment the root of a place may be correlated with the integrity of the place to a person (Tuan, 1980). The place needs to be more than just a mere place but capable of invoking memories of special experiences and adventures (Piley, 1992). In fact, person-place relationship is an interaction rather than a cause- and- effect process for people build a sense of self identity based on their emotional communication with a place (Marcus, 1992).

f. Place satisfaction

A person's place satisfaction depends on his perception of a place's quality and security (physical, social, emotional) which may be conscious, unconscious, objective, subjective, personal or social. In short place attachment is about a place's ability to meet people's needs and expectations of it. Place satisfaction is thus equivalent to place attachment. Satisfaction factors of a place comprise its facilities, adaptation,

performance and setting sustainability, visual characteristics, management, social communication, and economic values.

g. Interaction and activity features

One important factor that plays an important role in fostering place attachment is the intensity of meaningful human interactions and activities there. Festivals, celebrations, and other intercultural events are some of such social activities that foster place attachment.

h. Time factor

As mentioned before, time factor or in long time increase place attachment and many researchers supported this finding. Time develops place attachment, and prolonged residency of a place determines the rate of people's attachment to it.

Conclusion

Sense of place denotes emotional place-person interaction. As a person's cognition about a place's features (physical, performance and meaning) increases, his sense of that place becomes stronger and effectively shaped and differentiated additionally by factors such as age, sex, knowledge, experiences, and cultural tendencies. The nature of this place sense may be negative as when a place is disliked or avoided, or positive as when a place is liked or even loved. The sense of place is heightened when a person feels responsible for it. In this case place attachment is created. In other words, place attachment is a subset of place sense.

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