Symbolic Ties That Bind
PLACE ATTACHMENT IN THE PLAZA

SETHA M. LOW

INTRODUCTION

Place attachment is the symbolic relationship formed by people giving culturally shared emotional/affective meanings to a particular space or piece of land that provides the basis for the individual's and group's understanding of and relation to the environment. This chapter applies this definition of place attachment in order to identify a range of types of place attachment in cultural terms, and to present ethnographic examples of each type. It is argued that while there are often strong individualistic feelings that may be unique to specific people, these feelings are embedded in a cultural milieu. Thus, place attachment is more than an emotional and cognitive experience, and includes cultural beliefs and practices that link people to place. This discussion is illustrated with examples of how these often overlapping place attachment processes occur in the central plaza of San José, Costa Rica. Future research directions for a cultural analysis of place attachment are suggested as part of the conclusion.

A CULTURAL DEFINITION OF PLACE ATTACHMENT

At a psychological level place attachment refers to the cognitive and emotional linkage of an individual to a particular setting or environment (Hunter,

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1974) and has been discussed in terms of place identity (Yoshokawa, Fabian, & environment structures (Sheppard, 1982), space, and and community identity and symbolic (1976) asserts that place attachment is so bar to "be human is to live in and to know your place." Outlines the physical and relational dimensions of place attachment, including the role of personal and cultural landscapes.

A cultural definition of place attachment implies that for most people there is a meaningful and shared identity with a particular place. This attachment is based on the idea that "to be human is to live in and know your place." This attachment is shaped by cultural symbols and shared experiences. Acknowledges that people associate places with cultural traditions, values, and beliefs.

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A TYPOLOGY OF CULTURAL PLACE ATTACHMENT

The concept has grown through attention to cultural aspects of the built environment and spatial form (Lawrence & Low, 1990) and comparative studies of housing, culture, and design (Low & Chambers, 1988) and draws upon fieldwork experience in Third World housing and community development (Low, 1988), on rural vernacular architecture (Low & Ryan, 1989), and urban public space (Low, 2002). From these analyses, a broadly defined typology emerged through a process of comparative analysis (Strong, 2002).

The proposed typology of place attachment is made up of six kinds of symbols: the built environment, the landscape, and the group. The symbols refer to the nature of the people's linkage and include: (1) genealogical linkage to the land through heritage; (2) spatial linkage; (3) linkage through loss of land or destruction of community; (4) economic linkage to land through economic dependence or labor; (5) cosmological linkage through religious, spiritual, or mythological relationships; and (6) a narrative linkage through storytelling and place names.

This typology is based on the general categories of landscape and group that can include many subtypes or subcategories of attachment; cultures and places do not neatly fall into one type or category, and are mutually exclusive and often overlap in content.

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**Place Attachment in the Plaza**

Another way to define these types is in terms of the processes of place attachment. In other words, genealogical place attachment is maintained, strengthened, and acted upon by living in a place, by being born or marrying into a household, or by staying in a location for a period of time. The process of attachment, therefore, is one of strengthening the relationship between an individual and a place. Place attachment through loss or destruction is activated retroactively, through the process of losing the place and the subsequent remaking and re-creating through memory of a place that is now destroyed, either temporarily or irrevocably.

Economic place attachment begins with the purchase or exchange of a place, often for a price. Attachment is strongest when reinforced and when a person works in place or with the resources of a place such as the community and local economic life. Place attachment through loss and destruction is activated retroactively, through the process of losing the place and the subsequent remaking and re-creating through memory of a place that is now destroyed, either temporarily or irrevocably.

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historical relationship that produces a layering of meanings or, in the case of the loss of place, the destruction of that relationship leaving only the meaning-based aspects of place, generally refers to a more utilitarian relationship between people and land, such as the kind of attachment produced by ownership or of working in a particular place. Ownership of land is the most powerful example of an economic attachment in that it links people and land requirement that a citizen own land in order to vote, a rule that was in effect for some time in the 19th century. Citizenship and political participation are often related to land ownership, in that land gives a person literally a "place" in society. Place attachment in this sense connotes place to a sociocultural phenomenon.

There are examples of ownership as a type of cultural place attachment throughout the world, in that many cultures consider the ownership of land—individual or community—as basic to the definition of political personhood (Wilmsen, 1989). The struggle for land reform in Latin America, China, and Africa suggests that the concept of land ownership and tenure are salient in terms of economic as well as social and political survival. Rodman's (1987) study of land tenure and land ownership in Vanuatu "the place is also its people" (Rodman, 1987, p. 30), and men and land are owned by the community. The word for place in Vanuatu, "lively space" in which people live and nature. People have a special bond with the land. Everyone must own a piece of land by definition; in fact, it is virtually impossible to not have land. According to Rodman, a person is identified with his place such that a landowner's name and that on the "his place" (p. 36). Landownership generates a sense of insecurity and implies that one is a non.

Longman, Silverman (1977) also emphasizes landholding and belonging to a place in his analysis of Banda island in Indonesia, and presents evidence that strong ties to a place can be maintained even when a person is absent.

Cosmology

The first three types of place attachment emphasize the familial, social, personal attachment of people to lands and the sacred. These definitions emphasize the ideological, that is, the religious, moral, and mythological, meaning of place. Broadly defined, cosmological place attachment refers to a culture's religious and mythological conceptions of the world and the structural correspondence of these ideas with the landscape. Place attachment in this sense is the experiencing of living with the physical presence of and concrete evidence for cosmological beliefs. Sacred or sacred land is a place that is spiritually significant to a number of religious traditions. A place called "the body must be properly aligned in space in order to benefit from cosmic forces." Biler's (1987) study of the Batsimara of Africa shows the symbolism of architect-built houses and village structures from cosmology and social structure. This view of the human body and a number of smaller units make up the whole of the cosmos with the human body through house form (Sawoh, 2001; Hegemeyer, 1994; and Anderson hills of Bolivia, the physical and spiritual meaning of cosmological place attachment is generated by their identification of the mountainous landscape with other mountainous places. People who work in human anthropology to the mountainous landscapes. Sacred places on the mountains are visited in order to promote health and healing. (Rigden, 1987).

In Japan, the traditional Shinto religion and ritual beliefs suggest that there exists a cosmological attachment to the natural landscape including spiritual places such as mountains or a grove of trees. The souls and spirits that are said to reside in the rural environment is "matcha-like" expression described in both daily ritual and annual ceremony (Jenny & Robinson, 1989, p. 39). Thus, cosmological and pilgrimages are combined. Jeremy and Robinson (1989) found that in the mountainous regions of the northwestern Honshu mountain ranges are still worshipped as an extension of the sacred places, and festivals are still held at temples that marks Mount Hachimayama. Even Dore (1908), who studied such a peaceful place, "the place of peace" (p. 23). It is a place where monks and nuns work in mountainous areas, are concentrated in human energy. And finally, in Japan, they are visited in order to promote health and healing. (Rigden, 1987).

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day marketplace. On the east side was the cathedral, on the north were the warehouses, on the west were the remaining structures filled with small businesses, a hotel, the Frasca Fornacia, and a few private residences. Sunday, after mass, the parque central was crowded with religious processions, social events, and local activities. The parque central, designed to be the center of the growing town of San José, was oriented as a square city block with north-south and east-west axes.

The first major change in the parque central was in 1846, when President Carlos Antonio Castilla y Arana, a political activist, and a member of the parque central. The images of an upper-class neighborhood park and an urban recreational space appear to exist, one in the painting and the other in the photographs of the period. The European fountains, serenades, and gates, however, reflect the establishment of European values as the public symbol of progress.

This turn-of-the-century version of parque central was not changed until the land in the immediate area was redeveloped during the paving of the city streets. Increased automobile traffic and, more recently, diesel bus transport have added to the noise and congestion of the surrounding area. In 1944 the first actual construction of a public park was started with the construction of a small concrete kiosk donated by a Nicaraguan industrialist. Below the kiosk was a railing that was replaced by a modern kiosk that today has become a gloomy children's library. Throughout this period and into the 1950s, the edges of the parque central retained a number of the original private residences of elite families and some of the former military barracks now in the guise of a school. Café lined the northeastern corridor and people walked the parque central to go on Sunday during the evening of the military band. But the shift in the major symbols marks the change in cultural focus of the country. The industrials' interests and new cultural influences from the United States and North American countries were beginning to be reflected in the parque central landscape.

The parque central still retains the cathedral on the east, but is now surrounded by banks, movie theaters showing North American films, bars for tourists, and two popular men's clubs, the Seta Palace and Le Phte. On the southeastern side, the 19th-century and early 20th-century male cigar smokers and elderly Cinta Rican men spend their days reading the newspaper, talking to one another, and watching women walk by. On the walkways, alcoholics men compete for middle-class customers when they have a willing victim the action changes from shoes giving to gambling, with punks are also seen carrying air guns and knives. The area is known for looking for easy prey, but the police that has been passing young women as they sit during their surveillance of the crowd. In the late afternoon, crowds replace the children and the traffic jam starts to erect. Security forces times give performances in the kiosk, drawing children from the underground library, and other activities related to the social behavior of the original plaza mayor of San José known as parque central.

Setting

Parque central was the colonial plaza established in 1751 as a green, rect-}

angular space covered with trees used predominantly as a Saturday and Sun-

place attachment in the plaza

leads people to place by bringing together two constructs—that of the camp, country, or land with family, relative, or kin.

Summary

The typology presented—genealogy, loss or destruction, economics, cosmology, pilgrimage, and narrative—covers the range of cultural place attachment for the literate or oral cultures. These types can be further grouped into three categories: (1) social aspects of place attachment through family, (2) economic aspects of place attachment through economic correspondences, pilgrimage, or narrative, and (3) ideological aspects of place attachment through cosmological correspondences, pilgrimage, or narrative. In other words, place attachment in cultural landscapes can be rooted in social-ideological life—social, material, and ideological. The next step in the refinement of the typology is to move to different cultural landscapes. These categories apply to a case example, the plaza in San José, Costa Rica.

PLAZA ETHNOGRAPHY: A CASE STUDY OF PLACE ATTACHMENT

To further explore the cultural concept of place attachment, examples are presented from an ongoing ethnography of plaza in San José, Costa Rica, that illustrate the six often interrelated place attachment processes within one cultural unit. The case study explores narratives of place attachment at the level of behavior rather than as a comparative, cross-cultural phenomenon, thus providing another source data for the classification of the concept.

METHODOLOGY

The ethnographic descriptions presented in the following case study are based on a series of thirty field visits to San José in San José, Costa Rica—since 1972 to 1974, the summer of 1975 and 1979, and two intensive fieldwork periods focusing only on the plaza for 4 months in 1986 and 1 month in 1987. The methods used include behavioral observations of plaza activities, behavioral mapping, sample population, clientele, photographic recording, interviews with occupants and nonspecie's in the surrounding neighborhood, library research on the history of the plaza, interviews with historians and other academic specialists, in the history of San José, and finally interviews with the government agency and private investors of many of the buildings both on and near the plaza. These materials were recorded as traditional oral history, and data were qualitatively analyzed. The descriptions presented are not exhaustive, but are illustrative of the different social behavior on the original plaza mayor of San José known as parque central.

In 1857 the first kiosk was added for the literary band to play for the Sunday retre. Electric lights were added and in 1957 the dirt paths were paved into curving walkways. Historical sources describe the parque central as a place for the masses to stroll and gather, although photographs of this period show the continue weekend markets, youths of all classes playing along the pathways, and groups of workers stopping for their coffees at the parque central gate. The images of an upper-class neighborhood park and an urban recreational space appear to exist, one in the painting and the other in the photographs of the period. The European fountains, serenades, and gates, however, reflect the establishment of European values as the public symbol of progress.

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PLACE ATTACHMENT IN THE PARQUE CENTRAL

The ethnography of parque central illustrates the place attachment processes from a microanalytic rather than a cross-cultural perspective. These examples explore place attachment as an ordinary, ongoing part of everyday living and social activity in this public, city center plaza.

Genesis

When I first arrived at the plaza I spent a considerable amount of time observing where everyone sat, stood, and waited and soon learned that a group of three or four men, one with a cane, and a woman normally occupied the same bench on the southwestern diagonal walk near the entrance. They were there every day, from 9:30 to 10:00 in the morning until 6:00 in the afternoon, when they were replaced by a young couple or group of friends waiting for the evening bus. As I began to know more about the plaza and plazas in other towns, I learned that other benches had a similar pattern with regular occupants, so much so that I realized, a small city a few miles away, the benches are known by the names of their occupants. If an occupant was ever missing, inquiries would be made about the health of the person, and their friends would be worried, especially if they were the elderly. In those cases, I asked the occupants who replaced the regulars whether they knew the reason for the absence. In general, I found that the regulars would be replaced by friends who were leaving the plaza at the same time as those who had left.

Economics/Ownership

Parque central and the area within it are not owned by any private individual or agency but are regulated by the municipal government. Nonetheless, the plaza acts as a workplace controlled by a variety of work groups, including the shoeshine men in the northeast corner, the ambulatory food sellers who sell up food stalls after 3:00 in the afternoon along the northern perimeter, the lottery ticket sellers with stands on both the northeastern and northwestern corners, the clandestine watch and jewelry sellers scattered throughout, and the construction laborers who wait for pick-up work along the western borders. There are also individual entrepreneurs who use the plaza as an office, such as the young man who was selling insurance contracts from a bench. He told me that the bench had become his office since the rents had become so high that he could not afford to maintain one in a nearby building. Most of these work activities have a history on the plaza. There are accounts in novels and in social science reports of the "territories" of the shoeshine men, the laborers, priests, and sellers of stolen goods. The current ambulatory food sellers are recently immigrated Nicaraguans, but they are only replacing other food vendors who left before. There is a kind of economic place attachment in process here—quite strong for a group like the shoeshine men, and less so for the young man who has just set up an office on a bench—and this place attachment is the outgrowth of a utilitarian need, that is, to have a place to exchange goods and services. There was a point in my research that I felt that more than anything else the plaza was a public workplace, and that those who worked there were the most tightly attached to the space as a whole due to time and space. The shoeshine men articulate this attachment by saying that this is their place, that they have worked here their entire lives, and that in many cases their brothers, cousins, and sometimes children will take over their place in the plaza. Thus, work is a kind of economic attachment that does not necessarily involve ownership of land, but still implies the control and attachment to place.

Cosmology

The placement of the Catholic cathedral on the plaza, on the eastern perimeter, best illustrates the process of cosmological place attachment in the plaza. The Spanish Crown, who placed the 1786 basilica in this position on the original plaza major were following a mandated tradition established by the Laws of the Indies in 1571. These ordinances directed the Spanish who settled lands in the New World to organize new cities around a plaza, with the city hall, police barracks or station, a Catholic church and the houses of the mayor or cacique facing this civic center. The cathedral thus became both the physical and spiritual center of urban life, and the plaza became a forum or front garden for religious and social activities. The piso or retreat of young people on Sundays and holidays, the religious role of the choir in lifting the voices of the clergy playing at the conclusion of the mass. The citizens of San José then pour down the cathedral steps into the plaza for the traditional promenade. The relationship of the plaza and the front steps of the cathedral are the site of most religious and civic procession and festivals.

Joséfinos, when asked about the meaning of the cathedral, say that it represents the traditional, the national religion of Costa Rica, its relationship to the state, and the increase of prostitution, drug dealers, and other petty criminals, as a bad influence on the neophytes. Theological interpretations are offered by the friends and future spouses they strolled around the inner circle of the plaza after Sunday mass, accompanied by the military band in a traditional refrain.

Narrative

In parque central, the large, cement kiosk has generated considerable narrative and figurative language (even from me, as I write about it as a cement
monstrosity. An example is the *hrac* (saying) about the cement kiln when it was first built in 1949 and had a nightclub in its base instead of the children's library that is there now. The saying goes "as kilko to ksesta mose m se gez "the kilko that Masakosa built is where the pleasure is" (or where they are most satisfied in the sensual sense of the word). The saying refers to the fact that the kilko was built by a wealthy Nsangwi businessman who was a friend of the dictator Somoza, and the ambivalence that Costa Rica feel about their northern neighbor because of current U.S. involvement in Costa Rica and Central American politics. According to conservative Costa Ricans, Nicaragua represents a model of immorality (they sell themselves politically and are hotter, dicker, and smarter) and the tearing down of the Victorian kiosk represented a defilement of Costa Rican and European-linked (white, repressed, moral) culture (culture). However, other Costa Ricans derive pleasure from exposing economic and political realities that the newer cement kilko represents. Ultimately, the nightclub was replaced by a children's library, which some people feel is a more appropriate civic symbol. The saying, in figurative and metaphorical language, can be analyzed thus as a strategy for expressing conflict about public values, and at the same time I think it demonstrates the attachment that citizens feel to the elements of the prewar cultural heritage.

Other narratives are reminisces about the plaza as a lovely space with upper-class users, yet these reminiscences do not express the current fear of the loss of place by the older groupings than with the actual deterioration or change in the population over time.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH AND DESIGN

This exploration of cultural place attachment is just a beginning. In this discussion I have attempted to define the concept, develop a typology, identify the processes involved, and illustrate the concept with ethnographic and cross-cultural examples. The next step is to test these ideas by applying the concept and typology to other settings and cultures, thus, modifying what has been presented here to include a broader range of cultural contexts. As the concept evolves, there should be more relevance and specificity to different situations and environments.

I also think that the development of a cultural theory of place attachment could proceed. One suggestion is that the cultural processes be analyzed through a matrix of social and psychological processes, people, time, and place from the perspective of how they are involved in each of these categories. Such an analysis would help to classify how the categories both differ and are similar to one another in terms of these dimensions, and would help to identify the mixing concepts and ideas in this preliminary exploration of the concept. Part of the outcome of such an exercise might also be to define the variability and dimensions of cultural place attachment so that the cultural part of the concept could be better integrated with the psychological aspects.

The next step in the development of a place theory of attachment, then, would be to integrate the psychological dimensions of the concept with the cultural dimensions presented. Social, cultural, and psychological, as well as economic and political, aspects of place attachment do not function independently, but as part of a conceptual whole. To answer questions, therefore, we need to work out the articulation of the different aspects as they are acted upon in daily life. The role of emotional/affectional attachment both at an individual and group level also need to be viewed within a developmental perspective. In other words, how do people learn to attach to places? Is attachment solely an individual and developmental process in that one is the context for growth and human development, or does culture provide a framework and set of salient symbols for this attachment process. For instance, gender-specific attachment clearly includes the importance of the interpersonal interactions with family members as well as the house/home and its cultural meanings to form an integrated concept of home attachment. Moreover, however, the most important future research direction of this work is to include a cultural dimension of place attachment in environment-behavior and environmental design research. Too often the cultural or group perspective is overlooked, yet the out-of-awareness influence of culture is apparent in most attachment processes. In any environment-behavior study of a particular place, one needs to ask questions about the emotional/affectional aspect of being in the place. Are all the residents attached to, say, neighborhood, or are there three different kinds of attachments that would explain other outcomes such as community involve- ment or eviction? Some examples of this kind of research are touched upon in the chapters in this volume by Pellow, Lawson, Huffman, and Hummon, but should become standard in environment-behavior inquiry.

Further, the question of place attachment has a role to play in environmental design of places. Designers and planners are aware that people are attached to places they experience the resistance of populations who do not want to be relocated or have their neighborhoods changed or modified. A better understand- ing of place attachment may provide new options or, at the very least, provide better, stronger arguments for the evaluation and maintenance of environments that would otherwise be destroyed or totally changed. With the information that place attachment is a significant part of human well-being and psychological adaptation to an environment, designers may be able to solve problems of housing and public space in ways that protect those aspects of the environment that are essential for the attachment for attachment. Examples include cases in landscape architecture in which "the face of the environment" is protected in the new community revitalization and renovation, or the conces- sions made for the American groups in protecting their sacred lands and hunting rights. May Huffman's research on the Pine Barrens (Chapter II: Place Attachment in the Plaza) provided a database for the land-use planning model developed by the National Park Service for that region.

REFERENCES


