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## The Notion of Place, Place Meaning and Identity in Urban Regeneration

Norsidah Ujang<sup>a,\*</sup>, Khalilah Zakariya<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Department of Landscape Architecture, Faculty of Design and Architecture, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Malaysia*

<sup>b</sup> *Department of Landscape Architecture, International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

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### Abstract

Urban regeneration within traditional settings has transformed places and constructed meanings embedded in the existing social and cultural settings. Thus, the social and emotional meanings, attached to or evoked by the elements of the urban environment were at least as important, often more so than the structural and the physical aspects of people imagery. This paper reviews the definitions and concept of place in establishing a conceptual framework for urban regeneration in light of the sense of place and environmental psychology (place attachment) principles. The reviews highlight the importance of place-based approach and principles in the era of urban regeneration and its implication on the continuity of place meaning and identity in the Asian context. This paper advocates the importance of the psychological dimension of place in regenerating urban setting for psychological well-being of the inhabitants.

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*Keywords:* Place; identity; meaning; attachment

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### 1. Introduction

A space is more properly conceived as abstract geometries (distance, direction, size, shape, volume) detached from material form and cultural interpretation (Gieryn, 2000 from Hillier and Hanson 1984). To imbue the space with meaning, individuals, groups or societies changed spaces into places (Relph, 1976).

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\* Corresponding author. Tel : +60389464071; Fax : +603 8948 0017.  
E-mail address: [norsidah@upm.edu.my](mailto:norsidah@upm.edu.my).

In parallel with Relph, Tuan (1977) argued that places were essentially "centers of meaning constructed out of lived experience" that through time would be perceived as significant to the lives of the people.

There is growing evidence that urban regeneration within traditional settings has diminished the place meanings of transformed and or newly constructed places. According to Arefi (1999), in addition to the commodification of place, the roots of placelessness lie deep in globalization (Aleya, 2012) that generates standardized and inauthentic urban landscapes. The lack of connectivity of the physical landscapes with place meanings cut across broader physical, cultural and emotional context. In this regards, Relph (1976) described placelessness as "an environment without significant places and the underlying attitude which does not acknowledge the significance in places." This scenario threatens the quality of public spaces in the city (Oktay, 2011). As the phenomena affect the identity of the many local urban places, there is a need to approach places contextually and understand the complexities of what give places their identities.

The loss of place meanings and attachment result in the inability to continue to feel, to practice and to recall experiences due to, for example in the loss of the objects during a natural disaster (Hull et al., 1994). A loss of identity could be, as a result of a change and transformation of buildings and spaces, change of uses and function. The loss of association or desegregation or detachment (e.g. relocation to new housing and community) also weakens place attachment. Researchers argue the incapability of the modernist approach in facing the contemporary issues including the deterioration of historical cities (Salama, 2009). When these happen, self or group identity will be disintegrated, as a result, of the losing of the identity. Sustaining the meanings and identity of the urban elements and icons (objects, structures and images) is important because they contribute to self-identity, sense of community and sense of place (Hull et al., 1994). Therefore, in any regeneration effort, it is imperative to understand the level and form of attachment and meanings associated with the places to unravel place significance.

## 2. The Concept of Place

The concept of place is physical as well as psychological. The physical form, activity and meaning are mixed together to form the sense place (Montgomery, 1998). In the context of environmental psychology, place is predominantly defined by a physical environment constructed based on its interrelationship with individual's internal psychological and social processes and attributes and activities done at the place (Smaldone, 2005). The place could not be separated from people who make places and invest meanings in them as stated by Soja (1996) quoted in Gieryn (2000), "places are also interpreted, narrated, perceived, felt, understood, and imagined." It is apparent that without addressing the significance of the people's psychological connection with places, any form of assessment in determining place quality will be inadequate.

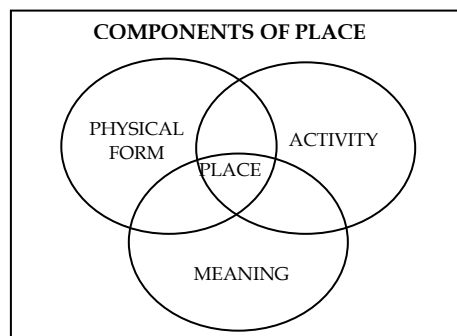


Fig. 1. The components of place (Source: Montgomery, 1998)

Urban regeneration involves the process of remaking places. In this process, regeneration initiatives are planned to improve the physical conditions of places, increase economic growth and environmental sustainability, in order to facilitate better social life for people (Roberts and Sykes, 2000). Steadman (2003) advocates the importance of the physical features and conditions in the construction of place and place meanings based on its environmental attributes. He noted that the physical features influence the symbolic meanings of the landscape. Place attachment is embedded in the feeling, emotion and behaviour reflecting people responses towards the environment. However, the loss of place physical character and identity would affect the people's perception and attachment to places. Therefore, it is recommended by researchers that in order to fully capture the meaning of a place as a basis for regeneration initiatives, the setting, the activity within a defined boundary and the sense of place should be complementarily taken into account (Agnew and Duncan, 1989 from Gustafson, 2001). Within this framework, human experience and behaviour developed through a network of memories and identities attached to the environment (Cheshmehzangi and Heath, 2012) should be regarded as a source of reference in urban regeneration. The gap lies in the inability to connect human psychological sense of place with the new development concept and framework.

A place is a manifestation of human culture. Culture is a social process where people create meaning to give themselves a sense of identity (Cohen, 1994). The cultural spaces imbued people way of life and devoted cultural phenomenon are essential to building a place identity (Lai, 2013). The spaces will turn into places at the point where the setting's physical and cultural characteristics meld with the individual's affective perceptions and functional needs (Bott, 2005). Though much has been transformed with regards to the physical and the activity in the place making process, the effects of place attachment on cultural identity have not been concurrently brought to the attention. Regenerating places without considering the cultural aspects will potentially result in non-place, a place devoid of local identity. A house is not a home if the house does not reflect the culture and the way of life and if it lacks meaning to its dwellers.

Awareness of environmental perception of place is an essential aspect of urban design. Research on environmental perception has been focusing on the experiential sense of place. It stresses the importance of attachment in sustaining a sense of place beyond the physical and visual connectivity of the place and the observant. Perception is associated with the mental image, consciousness, physical sensation and intuitive cognition of the elements of place. In this regards, cognition is a form of environmental knowing in which complex information from the environment presented is organised, sorted and given values. (Carmona et al, 2003; Hassannudin, 2003). However, these values are also affected by the individual's personal emotional expression towards the environment due to the meaning and attachment established between a person and the setting.

The meaning and importance of a setting held by an individual or group result from individual and group's experience with the setting (Steadman, 2000; Williams, 2002). Some place meanings are translated into strong emotional bonds that influence attitudes and behaviours. Meaning and attachment affect imageability and influence by culture and experience (Altman, 1984) and determine the social and cultural values of a place particularly to its inhabitants (Shamsudin and Ujang, 2008). It supports continuity and sustainability of their cultural identity. Due to the changing context and the influence of globalised culture and built forms, there is a need to consider the psychological aspects alongside the physical and visual aspects of a place in remaking cities. These pose a challenge to the way architects, urban planners and landscape architects plan, design and redevelop cities since places will continue to manifest changes culturally, socially and spatially (Sandercock, 1998).

Places are dynamic and continue to regenerate as people struggle to adapt to new meanings that might have detached from their culture and identity. The above reviews suggest that a place meaning reflect the form of association between people and places that vary according to personal and socio-cultural contexts. The question is how to adapt the concept of place within a different typology of settings in

multi-cultural context such as the Asian cities? What influences people's attachment to places and how this would affect regeneration of places and communities? This paper addresses place attachment as indicator to determine the sense of place in the context of urban regeneration.

### **3. Place Attachment Dimensions**

Place attachment concept is closely linked with the affective aspects of environmental meaning (Altman and Low, 1992). Place attachment refers to "the development of an affective bond or link between people or individuals and specific places" (Hidalgo and Hernandez, 2001) expressed through interplay of affects and emotions, knowledge and beliefs, and behaviours and actions (Prohansky et al., 1983). It develops when "a place is well-identified and felt significant by the users and able to provide condition to fulfil their functional needs and supports their behavioural goals better than a known alternative" (Williams et.al, 1995).

Researchers locate place attachment within the psychological (emotion and feeling) and the functional (dependence) domain of environmental experience. In this regards, Hidalgo and Hernandez (2001) based on Ainsworth and Bell (1970) described, in the most basic form, the main characteristic of place attachment: "the desire to maintain closeness to the object of attachment which also describes the special feeling towards a particular place". In the context of place regeneration, the sense of belonging, degree of attraction, frequency of visits and level of familiarity are indicators of place attachment. Place attachment, therefore, can be considered as one of the criteria in place making. The need is to consider the users' feelings and reactions towards the attributes and characteristics of an urban place. Ujang (2010) in her study on urban places in the context of Southeast Asian city suggests that the place attachment contribute to the making of place identity.

#### *3.1. Place dependence*

Place dependence indicates the importance of place in providing features and conditions that support specific goals or desired activities (Shumaker and Taylor, 1983). In this case, the achievement of highly valued goals will produce more positive feelings toward a place than will the attainment of minor goals. Thus, the degree to which a person feels attached to, or dependent on, a place is a function of how well his or her needs, goals, or motivations are satisfied or how positive he or she perceives his or her experiences to be in that location. Moore and Graefe (1994) associated place dependence with the perceived strength of association between a person and specific place - the degree to which occupants perceive themselves to be dependent on a particular place. According to Smaldone (2005), place dependence comes from a person's consideration of two things: (a) the quality of the current place and (b) the quality of other substitute places that are comparable to the current place. It concerns the functional and utilitarian aspects of place attachment. It links to the functional quality of the physical elements and activities that are distinct from other places, which is central to urban design quality.

#### *3.2. Place identity*

Place identity is the way in which a place informs the identity of a person or people (Proshansky et al., 1995) and the composites of its characteristic features (Relph, 1996). Identity in an urban environment is to a greater or lesser degree defined by the environment's elements and activities or events taking place within that environment (Cheshmehzangi and Heath, 2012; Zakariya and Harun, 2013). Places play a vital role in developing and maintaining self-identity and group identity of the people (Davenport and Anderson, 2005). Thus, the place is an experiential process that forms the identity and distinctive place

character. To understand the process, planners and designers should examine the meanings that people attach to a locality in trying to create a sense of place. In defining place identity, urban designers are mainly focusing on appearance and imageability of the physical elements but fall short in integrating place meanings as indicators for place distinction. Steadman (2003) claimed that the landscape characteristics drive place meanings that in turn shape place attachment (place identity) and attitudes toward place (place satisfaction). The social value of urban public spaces makes them significant within the cities due to people needs (Siavash, 2012).

In psychological term, place identity refers to "the symbolic importance of place as a repository for emotions and relationships that give meaning and purpose to life, reflects a sense of belonging and important to a person's well-being" (Proshansky et al., 1995). It contributes to individual, groups and cultural self-definition and integrity (Altman, 1992) and individual variations in the people perception and conception of place. Relph (1976) argued that people need a sense of identity, of belonging to a specific territory and /or group. Individuals need to express a sense of belonging to a collective entity or place, and of individual identity, which may be achieved by physical separation or distinctiveness, and sense of entering into a particular area (Carmona et al., 2003). In the context of urban design, place identity mainly concerns the physical image and people perception with little emphasis on the degree of people-place association and the depth of meanings. Research in the realm of environmental psychology mostly connects place attachment to self and community identity and distinction. To grasp the sense of place, the urban designers should integrate the attributes and characteristics of a place in the place attachment framework.

### *3.3. Sense of belonging and rootedness*

Sense of belonging and rootedness has interchangeably used with the sense of place in place attachment studies. Rootedness and a conscious sense of association or identity with a particular place make a place meaningful to the people. Rootedness refers to "'unconscious' sense of place and the most natural and unmediated kind of people place tie" (Arefi, 1999). Rootedness together with care for a place often associated with a close attachment and a high degree of familiarity (Relph, 1976). This concept has been examined in the context of home and neighbourhood, which provided an individual with a secure point as significant spiritual and psychological attachment to a particular place. In this case, further exploration on the subject should be relevant to the urban areas that suffer from unfit physical development. What types of psychological attributes influence the form and degree of attachment to the places? Study on place attachment will bring the significance of the attributes to attention.

## **4. Place Attachment and Influencing Factors**

Reviews from the literature on place attachment have indicated that the form and degree of attachment are influenced by many factors that include socio-demographic characteristic and pattern of use. Gieryn (2000) claimed that place attachment results from many factors: accumulated biographical experiences (e.g. feelings such as fulfilling, terrifying, secured); the socially and culturally shared activities (community activity, meeting with friends, shopping) and the geography and the architecture of the place (e.g. house with a unique location, features and characteristics, landmark, recognisable community or public buildings). On the other hand, place attachment diminishes by the loss of place. Gieryn (2000) from Fullilove (1996) argued that the loss of place and its meaning(s) must have negative implications for individuals and collective identity, memory and history and for the psychological well-being. The event, history and monument of the place shape one's memory and perception of the environment (Othman et. al, 2013). The physical environment and its characteristics contribute to the construction of a sense of

place (Steadman, 2003). In this regards, the physical characteristics strengthen both place attachment and satisfaction. However, he argued that researchers fail to explain the degree of influence and its causal linkages. Therefore, there is a need to examine the degree of influence that the attributes and characteristics of places affected by urban regeneration that affects place attachment. Factors that shape the sense of place in a particular socio-cultural and economic setting should be examined to understand the meaning of place in that particular locality.

#### *4.1. Influence of familiarity*

Places to which individuals become most attached are those with which they have the highest levels of experience, often resulting from long-time habitation in a particular locality, important events and life stages or frequent visits (Gustafson, 2001). Familiarity covers four main dimensions of familiarity (Hassanuddin, 2003 from Mainardi et al., 1990). First is relating to locational knowledge, i.e. to know where the place is. The second dimension is visual recognition that relates to the ability to recognise the place. The third is place name-recognition and lastly an interaction with the place. The most familiar places are those who are frequently used or visited. There are two different levels of familiarity that which are acquaintance familiarity and functional familiarity (Ibid.). The former refers to repeated exposure to a place without having a specific aim. The later refers to being in contact with a place and integrating with the facilities through some activities happening within it. There is a general agreement that a various degree of familiarity can affect people perception and attitude and level of attachment. The need to understand familiarity is strongly relevant to local and historical contexts because changing forms and actions of a place (e.g. historic streets) if not sensitively implemented, will disassociate the attached users from their familiar places. This scenario particularly applies to the need to upgrade and revitalise places within the urban areas that have held particular meanings and imbued in the established socio-cultural context.

#### *4.2. Influence of demographic characteristics*

A strong sense of attachment to a particular place is influenced by racial, ethnic or class identity (Rose, 1995). The idea suggests that meanings be categorised based on the variation in the characteristics of the people. Therefore, there is a need to identify place attachment and place identity based on consensus from stratified user groups according to their roles and social, cultural characteristics. It is to examine how places of different socio-cultural characteristics differed in the degree of attachment and how meanings are layered in similarities and differences. According to Rose (Ibid.), when a place becomes central to the identity of people, strong emotions of place attachment may lead to space claiming and exclusionary practices which is detrimental to the human well-being and social cohesion within a community. In the context of this discussion, the role of the user has an impact on the attachment. The meaning of the role is the degree to which something or somebody who involve in a situation or activity and the effects that they have on it. In this context, 'users' are those who rely on public spaces or buildings for passive and active engagement (Hassanuddin, 2003 from Francis, 1989). The function of personal investment to the place could be of significance. In place making process, a sense of community attachment should be regarded as a collective value of a place that demands respect.

#### *4.3. Influence of culture*

Culture, environment and psychological processes operate in an interdependent system. They are linked by mental activities (seeing, hearing, smell, interpreting, beliefs and attitudes) and behavioural



activities (what people do and how they act) towards their environment (Altman and Low, 1992.). In urban design, a place is also seen as how people experience a place (physically and psychologically). The cultural aspects of a place involve meanings related to the environment (Gustafson, 2001) because place attachment involves culturally shared affective meanings and activities associated with a place that derived from socio-political, historical and cultural sources.

The variety of the environment (Harun et. al, 2013) can also reflect the complexity of the culture that distinguishes a group from others. It is a way of life, symbols, meaning and cognition and survival strategies accepted as norms, significant and typical for a particular group of people. In the case of a pluralistic society, it is recognized that the cultural principles play an important role in defining group identity hence affect the character and identity of the place they inhabited. An individual attachment is a subset of a culturally determined principle. In examining the issue of cultural changes and differences in attachment according to different cultural forms, Riley (1992) discovered that the difference in landscape experience poses different form, types and degree of attachment for different cultural groups. Identity of cultural spaces and the perceptions are developed, as a result, of people's memories, familiarization, the sense of place and the meanings of the spaces (Lai et. al, 2013).

## **5. Conclusion and Implications to Asian Context**

This paper advocates place-based approach and concepts in examining the attachment to urban places. Place is a space imbued with meanings (Relph, 1976), therefore in a regeneration process, the affected places should be approached and understood as a place represented by a total human experience: the physical elements and activities mixed with the socio-cultural and psychological components. Therefore, the definition of a place is not confined only by the physical form and physical boundary. It is to pay more attention to those who live in place-to the actual human experience as well as the perceptual aspect of the city. The followings describe the general principles for intervention effort to regenerate places:(a) the experience of place is physical as well as perceptual and psychological because both aspects are interrelated to create a sense of place; (b) users (the public) and their experience and perception provide the main source of evidence in understanding place attachment and identification of place character distinction; (c) place attachment is a positive factor that can contribute to sustaining place identity thus promote psychological well-being, fulfilment and happiness to the urban inhabitants.

In sustaining the identity of places in the Asian context, place attachment and meaning(s) could be explained by examining the live-in experience of the people in place. The multi-cultural characteristics will pose a challenging task in determining the social and psychological values of the place in the perception of the people. In cities, the form and degree of attachment are reflected in the place dependency in the economic and cultural sense. In some parts of Asia, the cultural significance of the place is strongly manifested in the diversity, colonial influence, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic identity. Lim (2005) suggested that the evolution of places should respond to the cultural environments, where the social well-being of communities and their 'valuable and memorable elements' can grow accordingly. Community attachment may prevail as the influencing factors in defining a sense of place. The meanings are layered in the social and cultural construction of place. However, these values are continuously under the threat of modernisation and unfit regeneration of places and global images. This condition will lead to the issue of social detachment and the places devoid of significance. It is important to understand the roles of cultural spaces through examining the psychological sense of places imbued in the lives of the inhabitants from the past to the present.

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