

# The Developing Sense of Place

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Place has intuitive meaning, assigned value, and is associated with experiences linking self with the environment. Place, the possession and personalization of an environmental setting, reflects the values and predispositions we have grown with and continue to develop. As designers and planners we attempt to create environments that engender personalization and promote connection. For this reason it is imperative for us:

—to explore expressions and concepts of place, for they provide a window to self and the people environment relationship;

—to become knowledgeable of the process of developing sense of place; and

—to become further aware of personal development experiences that influence our environmental relationship and decision making.

Our sense of place evolves throughout the life span, but it is greatly influenced by the conditions and experiences we encounter in the first six years of our life. During this period of learning and development, patterns of relationship form and values associated with them become set in our processing (perception/cognition) system. Over time most of these pat-

terns or pieces of input become locked in our subconscious, only vaguely—if ever—in our conscious awareness, while significantly contributing to our thinking, feelings, and actions. Usually we respond to a setting with given characteristics of color, form, proportions, scale, etc., without analyzing what draws our attention. Many times it is not the sensed qualities of a setting we respond to, but rather an experiential reference associated with a similar setting from an earlier time. At other times it may be our shared inherent humanness that naturally generates adoption of a setting. Still another possibility is the individual or cultural assignment of value to a setting that we accept as having personal value. In any case, actual recognition of place is manifested through the agreement of an environmental setting with our internal disposition at a given time in the development associated with the perception and cognition of environmental information. This may help us better appreciate the development of a sense of place.

Our internal disposition to place may be cast both in a never changing temperament and an ever changing developmental cycle. Temperament is a regulator that may guide each of us in the control or manipulation of our environment in order to construct desired life settings that are in keeping with our personal view of reality. This innate characteristic may provide con-

tinuity and a thread of consistency to our changing and varied life experiences. Temperament includes a biological clock that influences the rhythm we maintain or seek in the movement of our physical and social environments. Related dimensions of temperament are those of adaptability—adjustments to the demands or conditions of a situation, and intensity of reaction—or degree of response to the influences within a setting. The relative stability of one's temperament provides consistency throughout the life span.

Abraham Maslow, in his theory of motivation, presents needs in a hierarchical format as motivation for guiding behavior. Each need is a stage or level that must be fulfilled prior to the realization and subsequent fulfillment of the next. Our basic physiological needs of food, water, and shelter motivate us to find the "basic place." Awareness of the qualities of place heightens as the satisfaction of a need occurs over time. As satisfaction is only temporary, our attention then focuses on the subsequent needs: physical and psychological safety, then love and belonging, followed by self esteem, and ultimately, self-actualization. The "home," for example, may provide fulfillment of our composite need for place. However, the image of home changes as our understanding of need and place changes.

The developing individual interplays

with the environment, creating higher orders of conceptual intelligence. Eventually, abstract images of the environment are formed and processed via an extensive classification system. The world is understood at the level of hypothetical deductive reasoning where predictions are made and tested. Egocentrism, where everything is seen in context of self, lessens, and the views of others are incorporated into the development of a broadened perspective.

We move from inborn reflexes that stimulate interaction with self and the environment to abstract constructs of meaning and value. Progress in intellectual depth and breadth is measured by one's flexibility of thinking while not restricted to the concreteness of the environment. At the more sophisticated dimension, one's view of the environment and construct of place are as dynamic as the development of knowledge itself.

Maria Montessori addresses the transformation of child to adult and environmental influences at an early stage as disposition to values of the environment at a later time. She describes the power of the absorbant mind and the importance of sensitive periods in one's life in the processing of environmental input. Early in life the human absorbs totally from the surrounding environment by means of the senses, collecting imagery like a photographer with camera and film.

No value is assigned in the process. Whereas, rationality systematically guides the adult mind in collecting valued details within the setting.

The predispositions for certain environmental qualities are significantly impacted during Montessori's critical periods of development. Sensitive periods occurring within the first six years are: walking, concern for details, need for order, unconscious and then conscious grasp of language, and use of hand: refinement of hand movements and touch. With regard to a need for order, our later perception of the environment and the characteristics of place within would be influenced by the degree of order experienced at this early period. In a similar way, our abilities to conceptualize are directly related to our acquisition of words and basic structure of the language.

Change is also experienced throughout socio-emotional development. Erik Erikson postulates a stage theory comprised of a series of crises or conflicts that humans pass through: trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs. shame and doubt, initiative vs. guilt, industry vs. inferiority, identity vs. role confusion, intimacy vs. isolation, generativity vs. stagnation, and ego integrity vs. despair. A diverse view and definition of place can be imagined as one identifies with each stage's influence on the individual's internal space. If, for example, the individual is working

on the resolution of conflict between intimacy and isolation, the perception of space and characteristics of valued place will vary with the socio-emotional interplay perspective.

Through the developmental process, we each have a different set of experiences. As a result we value given situations with varied degrees of attachment and agreement. Making decisions that structure or influence the environmental settings of another in any way then becomes a tricky business at best. The designer must become disciplined in awareness of personal responses to a situation or condition, be capable of identifying the values of the user/client and consultants, and be respectful of the time and qualities of site and context. All concerns must be attended to with equal emphasis if the created environment is to receive the status of *place*. The individual's encounter with place is a special interaction, a "fit," bringing the potential environment into meaningful focus. The history of person and setting has been cultivated over time and in specific time. The reality of each is registered in the moment. Mobility and communication networks that speed us to all corners of the world in a split second help distract our appreciation of time, content, and self, and the inherent qualities each possess. Designers and planners of the environment have a responsibility to understand and nurture the potentiality of a situation ac-

centuating those that encourage *place-ness*.

Incorporating the sensitivity and insight to engage in this level of thinking and subsequent action requires knowledge, yet most of all, a particular attitude toward people and the environment. We can learn about process and technique, but the designer's concern and perception of qualities greater than self comes with the letting go of data and technology. It complements the easily definable with that of native wisdom and caring. The importance of this attribute in design can be demonstrated and the process can be discussed, but only the individual can put into perspective the appreciation and respect for what really exists and what might exist.

The search for place is a basic drive we each possess in the exploration of meaning and value in our lives. The motivation to continue this search is fueled by our curiosity and desire to find and know. It is most satisfying when we discover an environment that enriches, nurtures, and perpetuates our sense of self in place.