CITY-PALIMPSEST AND THE DEPTH OF HUMAN IDENTITY

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Introduction

In that city… I just couldn’t see the end to it. End… please… could you please just show me where it ends? […] It wasn’t what I saw that stopped me, Max, it was what I couldn’t see.¹

With those words, a character called ‘1900’ is explaining to his friend the reason why he couldn’t leave the Virginia liner (his place of identity) and start his new life in the New York City. This picturesque image of the subtle approach to a space-place relationship, shows how important for people’s identity is a spatial aspect of their environment – how they need it to be complex and stimulating, but still conceivable and safe.

Additionally, those spaces that people dwell rarely are tabula rasa. They contain past meanings, sometimes totally erased, often transformed or redefined. City is a palimpsest with diverse strata that still affect its growth, even when being hidden or seemingly unreadable. Yet, it is not a particular meaning that forms a heritage of a space. It is its capacity to contain variety of meanings valid for its dwellers and thus to be perceived as a place, and preferably – a good place.

Motive and thesis

In regards to the notion of the spatial heritage and its protection, it is easier to encounter extreme opinions rather than a moderate rational approach. Moreover, those views operate in the shape of paradigms that are very often presumed a priori. Similarly like in the politics, it seems like there is no consensus possible and strongly opposite ideas can simultaneously be very vibrant, despite of being non-falsifiable. What is more, conservatory postulates frequently reflect the current political situation of a country they operate in. This is a macro scale aspect of a problem.

¹ The Legend of 1900, director: Giuseppe Tornatore, 1998, in: c.a. 01:42:00-01:43:00.
On the other hand, the idea of identification is a psychological process that is defined in an individual scale and the importance of it in understanding of the concept of the heritage is undeniable. Without this micro scale, ‘heritage’ is merely an instrument of a state and serves to preserve its prevalence. While it is possible to fall for such an approach, authors wish to assume, that there is more to the mentioned phenomenon than only in means of a simple mechanism of control.

In the social sciences it is quite common to see a tremendous gap between macro and micro scales. They are very often regarded in opposition to each other and one is likely to be favoured over another. Hegel and his protagonists would deny the parts and concentrate on the whole, while individualist Stirner would easily reject a god, state, nation, family and morality as a representation of the macro systems which tyrannize a self and, thus, needs to be discarded.

This surprising discontinuity in the political and psychological standpoints seems to be unjustified. It is where the Deleuzian theory of assemblage presents a new ways of understanding the interaction and togetherness of those both perspectives\(^2\) which construct a spatial heritage of people.

**Process of identification in a micro-scale**

To understand what a spatial heritage of people is, first one should investigate how a person attach to a certain spatial system. Without such an attachment, it is impossible to denote heritage as a vital phenomenon. Heritage that no one bond to is a simple propaganda.

Thus, notions of space, place, identity, place attachment, affordances, etc. need to be shortly introduced.

**Space | Place in the eyes of a psychologist**

Space and place are different notions, according to nomenclature of environmental psychology. Meaning, that a space can become a place under certain circumstances.

Cresswell, referring to Agnew’s definition, describes place as “a meaningful site that combines location, locale, and sense of place”\(^3\). Location means a set of coordinates – a point in space with measurable distances to other locations, it says where the place is. Locale describes material setting of the place – the way it looks. It contains all visible and tangible aspects of the place like buildings, streets, etc. – so basically all of the concerns of architects, urban designers and planners. Finally, the sense of place refers to meanings associated with the place and it consists of feelings and emotions that place evokes. Those meanings can

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be both individual and collective. Therefore the sense of place can arrive either from personal experience or from cultural, religious or other shared significance. It’s worth to emphasize that those meanings are not absolute, they depend on personal traits, values, schemas, etc. Same places can bear different meanings for different people. Moreover, those meanings can change for a particular person over time.

**Place and identity**

In environmental psychology recognition of the concept of a place and the means in which it is a factor in a human identity is relatively young. It dates back to 1960s, but a vivid development occurred in 1980s and later on. Such a fresh discipline is still in the process of foundation and thus is still struggling with ambiguities in nomenclature and the lack of systematization. What adds up to this equation is the fact that there is no unified theory of identity in general. Nevertheless, as it was primarily understood

ego identity ... is the awareness of ... self-sameness and continuity ... [and] the style of one’s individuality [which] coincides with the sameness and continuity of one’s meaning for others in the immediate community. Nevertheless, as it was primarily understood

However the contemporary definition diverted from the Ericsonian, it is still one of the core concerns of psychological research.

According to the concept of Twigger-Ross and David Uzzella (1996) based of multidimensional theory of identity of Glynis Breakwell (1993), the place can be a part of person’s identity when it provides a sense of continuity; helps to distinguish oneself from others is a source of positive self-esteem; builds a sense of self-efficacy and control over a given milieu.

Such a relation with a place comprise of several superposed layers forming a complex phenomenon that is dynamically converted according to the current stage of development of a person. Two aspects should be distinguished: place-identity (emotional factor) and place dependence (instrumental attachment).

**Sentimental versus rational**

Presented above relation with a place can be seen in two distinctive means: first, can be defined as a bonding to a place (connected with a notion place-identity) and is developed as early as in childhood analogically to other traits of identity, often in a very irrational manner. Second is a complex place attachment.

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6 op cit., p. 111.
8 One of the precursors of the place-identity theory was H. M. Proshansky who discussed the developmental predicates of an emotional relation with a place as early as in 1980s.
that is a dynamic process, partially conscious, that involve evaluation of particular characteristics of the given space⁹.

Hypothesis here is that place attachment, that grows in time and is evolving in accordance to the evolution of a personality, can be a rational basis for consideration in a discussion upon heritage protection. Although presumably it is impossible to separate the emotional factor from an instrumental attachment, information that flows from the latter is adequate for evaluation and planning. To understand such a multifaceted mechanism a short exposition of the most current theory is needed.

**Components of place attachment**

In 2010 Scannell and Gifford proposed very elaborate, tripartite model of place attachment understood as “the binding between individuals and their meaningful environment”¹⁰. First dimension – Person – describes to what extent is the attachment based on individual and collective meanings. Second – Psychological Process – says how are affect, cognition and behavior manifested in the attachment. Last dimension – Place – describes the object of the attachment – nature of the place.

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The Person dimension pertain to individual and collective meanings attached to places. On individual level, those meanings come from personal experiences, like realizations, milestones and personal growth. At collective level attachment comes from cultural, religious and historical meanings of places. Those levels are not entirely independent, they may overlap and intertwine.

The Psychological Process dimension concerns relations and interactions of individuals and groups with significant places. It consist of affective, cognitive and behavioural components.

Affective component describes emotional connection to a particular place. Although relations with places can represent vast array of emotions, both positive and negative, attachment is usually defined in positive terms.

Cognitive aspect of place attachment involves memories, beliefs, meaning and knowledge, which by association, makes places important. Those memories and meanings are a base for creating cognitive schemas of certain types or categories of places. In consequence it’s easier to attach to places that are familiar or similar to other places, that were objects of attachment.

Last aspect of psychological processes involved in place attachment is behavioural level, which involves action toward places. Examples of such actions are: maintaining proximity – the need to be close to significant place; reconstruction of place – either rebuilding destroyed places exactly as they were or selecting and transforming new places to be as similar as previous places of attachment (for example when people must relocate).

The third dimension of Scannell and Gifford model – Place – is divided into two levels: social and physical. Social level is similar with Riger and Lavrakas concept of ‘bondedness’, that consists of social ties, belongingness to the neighbourhood and familiarity with fellow residents. Physical aspect is connected with ‘place dependence’ and contain those features, that can be perceived as resources to support one’s goals.

From presented above framework it is clear to see that if an attachment to a particular place is possible to be formed, there is a strong need to preserve it. Thus, when a place stimulates personal growth and experience in general, it becomes a heritage on a personal level. Moreover, humans tend to protect what they are attached to.

**A space, a place and a ‘good’ place. Psychological standpoint**

From what was said before it can be supposed that some places produce a better grounds in the means of resources and some are in this sense detrimental. A comment on what makes a place a ‘good’ place should be made, providing that we do not understand ‘good’ in moral terms, but rather as a short expression containing a meaning of being suitable for realization of personal goals.

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*Fig. 2. Space | Place | a ‘good’ place diagram*  
*Source: Rumiež & Kłosiński.*
Based on presented before theory of place as location, locale and sense of place, psychologically “good” place should simply evoke positive meanings on an individual scale. Those positive meanings arrives from symbolism adequate to personal values and from potential for personal growth. “Good” place should promote activities that are in line with personal goals and provide resources for their achievement. It should also reflect individual as well as shared values derived from people’s identity (national, regional, religious and so on). Therefore “good” place should be relativized to its user, which in Gibson’s terms means it should have many ‘affordances’. Affordances are defined as “automatically readable invariables of an environment (…), potential ways of using”\textsuperscript{11}.

**Macro-scale perspective**

With all that was written about a micro-scale perspective in the means of how people attach to a space through attributing to it a meaning, a reasonable question arises: Are there any objective (physical) properties of a ‘good’ place? According to what was presented earlier, it should be relativized to its users. How to guarantee that, knowing that the users are so diverse? Is a compromise the only perspective that we have?

*‘Good’ place = “good” space? Architectural standpoint*

Architects organize themselves around the problematics of the quality of space rather than on an idea of place. They struggle to distinguish such parameters of a building or an urban space that would be ‘good’ – meaning aesthetic or simply beautiful. Nevertheless, architecture is a human-centric domain and for the fact that it is used by people, the meaning that users attach to it (or rather a spectrum of meanings) is naturally in the area of interest of architects.

In a professional perspective space is most frequently understood and analyzed in the parameters derived from Gestalt – the theory of a form which was established by Christian von Ehrenfels in the late XIX century. This approach is particularly vibrant for the sake of its clarity and simplicity. It is disturbingly easy in use, especially in criticism and evaluation. Presumably for those reasons, Gestalt is so deeply rooted in the domain of architecture and urban planning. Till this day, one of the few handbooks available for polish students in architecture and urban planning is *O budowie formy architektonicznej*\textsuperscript{12} and *Elementy kompozycji urbanistycznej*\textsuperscript{13}, both based mainly on the mentioned theory. In such an approach an architectural/urban composition is a more or less linear activity that falls under the fixed set of principles. A mastery

\textsuperscript{11} after: Lewicka M. Psychologia miejsca, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warszawa 2012, p. 34.

\textsuperscript{12} Żórawski J. *O budowie formy architektonicznej*, Warszawa 1973 (1961) is one of the first adaptation of Gestalt into architectural domain. It was written long before the resonant book of Rob Krier,* Architectural composition*, 1988, which is based on similar understanding of the theory of form.

\textsuperscript{13} Wejhert K. *Elementy kompozycji urbanistycznej*, Arkady, 2008 (1974) is a theory derived from a key handbook in planning that was written by Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1960, which, as above, is based on similar understanding of the theory of form.
in manoeuvring with those rules provides for a production of a ‘good’ space and thus, presumably, should induce attachment of meanings. As a consequence a place (assumed to be a ‘good’ place) is created.

Another possible approach lately introduced into urban design (but very rarely in architectural design though) is a participatory strategy. It appears in contemporary revitalization projects and, even more so, in spatial reconstruction plans. One of the tools designed for such occasions are gaming simulations. An idea behind it is to exercise possible spatial solutions with a participation of different parties: residents, governors, architects, planners, etc. All them are involved in a joint event or rather series of events leading to development of a structural plan. It is sometimes held in a virtual reality, expanding the range of people involved and the number of possible interventions. “Gaming simulation provides an interactive and efficient type of communication”. Here, we encounter a strategy that is evolutionary, in which an ongoing evaluation factor is a main constituent. In such an approach a form is not constructed according to the set of principles (at least not explicitly) but as a particular answer to the concrete needs and affections of an assemblage of people.

The reasonable question is whether forms that are a product of those strategies differ from one another. It is worth to speculate which approach leads up to a space that is prone to be encoded with a meaning, which is to say: to become a place.

As the latter scheme naturally seems more adequate, simply because it is based on a particular assemblage of people that are actively involved in a production of spatial solutions, the former present itself as more conscious and structural. It is very unlikely that such a theory is a misleading concept, especially because, ignoring individual differences, we are constructed in a quite similar way regarding emotions, affections, motivations, goals and, the most importantly, perception. Criticism applied here to Gestalt is concentrated on widening the denotation of its categories.

**Topological approach to physical space**

Topology examines geometrical objects in a more abstract way. It deals with certain properties of those objects – the ones that remain the same after applying to them homeomorphic transformations (such as stretching and bending). Generally,

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14 Compare with the works of Paula Rizzi, an Italian urban professor, co-organizer of *International Workshop The Future of the Past Design for Disaster Mitigation of Urban Cultural Heritage* [annual meeting, years 2008-2012].


17 When we say “geometrical” in such a context it is crucial to remember that it does not in general mean “of a metric space” or “Euclidean”. As a matter of fact, those spaces are exceptional. It is more likely to encounter different geometries.

it is impossible to categorize all topological objects, but when we guarantee that an item is “good enough”\(^\text{19}\), we can assume more about it. It will “behave” in a more regular way.

Therefore, those limitations that are put on geometrical objects are: **continuousness** (as the most basic), a fact of being in a **connected** space, **compact** space, **complete** space, **separable** space, uniformly **convergent** sequences, **dense** set, etc\(^\text{20}\). Those notions resemble intuition that is behind theories of a “good” orderly physical space. The difference is that with such an approach they do not denote any particular shape. It is more connected with the organization of a set than with a properties of its elements (that consist of a physical object).

Mentioned above aspects of a space in topology guarantee our ability to speculate about it. It is, in other words, **conceivable** and, what is more important, more **predictable**. Such a regularity is definitely beneficial from a perspective of a state. Determinate means controllable – and that enables governing and power of inducing desired values and behaviours.

But do we need predictability? Is the city a place that should work as a well set machine? Where the safe zone ends and the boredom begins? **And when we are bored, can we really attach to places?** Is there a place (sic!) for an accidental, indeterminate, surprising and confusing in a contemporary city? Do we accept those traits as components of heritage (our heritage)?

On the other hand, spaces with a total entropy is not a place for humans. We are highly organised organisms with a plenitude of fixed processes. When it comes to development of spatial heritage (and its protection), manoeuvring on a stimuli-boredom slide rule seems crucial for identification with it.

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**Collective genius loci**

Proposition here is that place attachment is a high-register occurrence that might be seen as a micro scale compartment of an overall distinctive and classifiable spirit of a place. It is where the notion of genius loci, which is often seen as objective, fixed and independent personification of a given space, is transformed into an **assemblage of subjective perceptual processes of individuals**.

It is crucial to point out that spatial consistency cannot be achieved by resorting to the primary (developmental) stage of a place-identity (bonding to a place that is settled as early as in childhood), which is most commonly irrational.

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\(^{19}\) Using a mathematical slang. Meaning, it has additional fixed properties.

\(^{20}\) All of those notions denote strict characteristic of a space in which an object is embedded. For more information about particular definitions, see above handbooks.
and sentimental. The only way to preserve a possibility to identify in those means is to protect everything that was built in the past, because the past is where those processes took place and were fixed.

In contrary to such a perspective, place attachment, which evolves in time and uses an evaluation processes, opens up a new way of thinking about heritage and the grounds on which it should be developed (also protected to some extent). In those means, spatial continuity can be achieved by protection of analyzable aspects of the place that forms this high-level phenomenon of identity, this so called collective genius loci that makes one place distinctive from another and that can be the source of individual positive self-esteem and self-efficacy.

City-palimpsest: togetherness and interactions. Summary

Another aspect that has been relatively recently added to an equation is the phenomenon of intensified mobility or at least the new means in which people in the XXI century can be dwellers. Individuals, contemporarily can identify with meta-places, occupying several different locations on a regular basis, existing in an extended space of reality and virtuality. That, surely, is transforming conditions of a place attachment and for this reason a person of an architect as well.

Proposed above “nomadic” schizophrenia, to follow the Deleuzian nomenclature, has a potential to help in distinguishing those aspects of place attachment that are rid of (or at least not limited to) sentimental aspects. It can help to analyze that collective genius loci composed of individual processes of identification with a place, that is perceived on the more objective means by those “«nomads», that possess multi-identities, who has lost his/her fixed identity”21.

For such a dweller especially, city is not a linearly developed history of endings and beginnings (governed by the state), but a palimpsest, where all the strata – the new and the old, built and unbuilt, existing or demolished – coexist under the superior “rule” of its nonlinear dynamics of a constant matter-energy flow. Moreover, human identification standpoint and a city-palimpsest governed by some sort of state are the two strata of a constantly evolving and re-defining system which is recognized as a spatial heritage of people. Such a system is understood as an ongoing process of falling from periods of stable states into equally important times of bifurcations (transitions). It is the richness of such a process that enables personal attachment to the place, and thus the validity of a particular heritage.