Sense of Place in an Inner City: Insights from "The End of the World"

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Abstract
Understanding cities is like understanding metaphors: one needs to engage in a search for the common ground below the surface. Although substantial work in the field of cultural studies has scrutinized metropolitan contexts, when discussing the global, we seem to have overlooked inner cities as part and parcel of that totality. The wave of increasingly profuse intercultural contact raised by instability, transgression of borders or new communication flows, has unquestionably disrupted traditional forms of place-based identity. In such context of blurred borders and permanent intersections, the present study aims to explore the "low-key" idiosyncrasies that shape cultural identity in the inner city of Gálvez, Santa Fe, Argentina, in an attempt to devise tools for the creation of politics of co-presence in this particular context. Inkeeping with this quest, the analysis of field data on the role of social forces in the creation of social space, (namely schools and educators, social institutions, cultural managers, and municipal governance), reveals the existence of multiple paths to strengthen people-place bonding. In this light, these findings should eventually contribute to model interventions to empower social actors to resist the idea of, as Robert Frost (1914) puts it, "mending walls" to foster social conviviality. Ultimately, the challenge of real-life urbanity, regardless of its urban form, appears to imply unveiling the bonds that foster a strong sense of belonging and the mutual recognition of the presence of alterity that may lead to the actual possibility of co-development.

Keywords: inner cities, people-place bonding, politics of co-presence, co-development.

Introduction

In today´s world, the constant flow of information, languages or people contribute to the construction of a global framework of interaction. However, the post modern paradox precisely evolves around the idea of an increasingly "borderless" world for some, but a "fenced world" for others. In the light of globalization, a "borderless world" is a concept of that implies that goods, services, information, technology, and capital migrate from nation to nation through their borders.Yet, many people nowadays sustain that the notion of a "borderless world" is more dream than reality. In fact, 65 countries have already erected barriers along their international borders, whose pursposes are to curb human trafficking, illegal migration or smuggling.

Following Clifford (1997), our post-modern world "is a complex place that navigates among permanent tensions between the familiar that occurs at the end of the earth and the oddity that simply takes place round the corner". In this respect, we should refer to the impact of information and communication technologies, which allow us to take invisible leaps from one country to another without even noticing the enormous distances that are overpassed. In effect, this state of virtual living in many places at the same time, paradoxically deprives us of the possibility of being in the here and now.The advance of social media, the prevalence of virtuality and its impact on the distribution of information worldwide, undoubtedly constitutes a challenge to how we define place and alternatively, what we think about cities and ourselves in them. The reality of the present situation, then, suggests that in such context of blurred borders and permanent intersections, traditional forms of place-based identity have been disrupted.

The currently developing field of Urban Culture Studies embraces the city as a kaleidoscopic scenery for human experience. So disturbing and complex is the reality of a city that it has become the object of interest for researchers and practitioners from a number of disciplines, namely: sociology, anthropology, history, lingüistics, photography, to mention but a few. In fact, it is through their inter-disciplinary conversations on the city that it may be possible to gain deeper insight into the essence of city life. However, one of the assumptions of the present study is that the cultural researcher´s task implies the drive to submerge oneself in the tangled reality of a city; its true nature being difficult to comprehend just by observing the surface. It is at this point that the idea of the city as a metaphor becomes appropriate for the problematization of the sociocultural complexity of urban forms. In fact, Urban Culture Studies engage the different shades of urban colour from its physical environment into other physical or nonphysical worlds in the memories, perceptions, emotions or even sounds that are reflected in the lifeways, or cultural forms that emerge within cities.Why, then, are cultural researchers so intrigued, obsessed, and fascinated by cities? The answer might be that "still, for most people, the town or city they are born in is the one that will shape their lives and become the stage set of their hopes and aspirations" (Worpole, 1992).

Although there is substantial work in the field of Urban Culture Studies concerning metropolitan contexts, when discussing urban forms, researchers seem to have overlooked inner cities as part and parcel of that totality. In this context, the purpose of the present study is twofold: to explore the "low-key" idiosyncrasies that shape cultural identity in the inner city of Gálvez, Santa Fe, Argentina, and to analyze field

data on the role of social forces in the creation of social space, (namely schools and educators, social institutions, cultural managers, and municipal governance), with the purpose of exploring multiple paths to strengthen people-place bonding. If citizens´ idiosyncracies and cultural activities are the medium for the creation of representational spaces, then the exploration of the nature of their bonds with urban settings, specifically an inner city, may generate tools for the creation of politics of co-presence. Our basic assumption is that there is a correlation between asset strength of the city of Gálvez and sense of place of its residents.Another assumption the present study will try to verify is whether there is a co-relation between levels of participation of citizenship and sense of place.

Literature Review

To comprehend the notion of "sense of place", we should first focus on the definition of the concept of space. "Whereas space is open and seen as an abstract expanse, place is a particular part of that expanse which is endowed with meaning by people" (Madanipour, 2001pp. 158). Following Tuan (1977), "place comes into existence when humans give meaning to a part of the larger, undifferentiated space". The process of nomination (i.e. the act of mentioning by name) of a given location can be said to differentiate it from the undefined (unnamed) space that surrounds it. Place, seen in this light, is seldom an entity that encompasses fixed meanings, on the contrary, it offers grounds for permanent negotiation of meanings.

In sharp antithesis with the notion of anthropological place is the concept of "non-place". Developed by French theorist Marc Augé (1993), this notion refers to generic, anonymous and temporary locations where people tend to be "in transit". In this globalized world, the proliferation of travel has produced an abundance of such spaces where people spend some time moving around, waiting or consuming, rather than inhabiting specific places. They are locations of convenience, transition, and consumerism such as airports, undergrounds or bus stations. In other words, "if a place is defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place" (Augé, 1993).

Further, Relph (1976) introduces the concept of placelessness and describes it as mutually constitutive with sense of place. In his view, settings which do not have any distinctive personality or sense of place belong to this category. He asserts that "when places cannot be culturally recognized, they suffer from lacking a sense of place; in this case people are faced with placelessness" (Relph, 1976).

As the construction of meaning is social, locations that are recognizable for their intense "sense of place" have a strong identity and character that is deeply felt by local inhabitants and visitors. For quite a long time, different terms were used to explain this notion. Alternatively, concepts like "character of place" and "spirit of place" or "topophilia" have been used to refer to the notion of sense of place.

The term "topophilia", for instance, was used by Tuan (1974) to describe the existing remarkable bonds between people and the physical settings or, in other words, to mean "love of place". Another concept that has been used to refer to the notion of sense of place is the idea of "lifeworld", i.e. "the culturally defined spatio-temporal

setting or horizon of everyday life" (Buttimer, 1976, in The Dictionary of Human Geography, 2000, pp. 449) which refers to the interplay of any individual person with the places and environment experienced in his/her ordinary life.

In fact, the term sense of place has been assigned multiple layers of meaning. To some, it is an intrinsic characteristic that some geographic places have, but others seem to lack. For other researchers, the discussion of the notion of sense of place is associated with the multiple ways in which people relate to places, at the level of perception, emotion and feeling. In this perspective, a pervading "sense of belonging" may arise, a vital bond that brings people and places together. When people experience the sense of belonging, "they are not only familiar with the place but they are emotionally connected with it; they distinguish and respect the symbols of the place" (Shamai, 1991). A sense of belonging seems to be experienced by people when certain qualities of a place (or "genius loci") foster a sense of authentic human attachment, rootedness and satisfaction with a spatial setting. The notion of "attachment" relates to the unique emotional connection between people and lived places (Altman, 1992). In fact, this concept has been extensively explored by researchers due to the fragilisation of people-place bonding in the context of globalisation, increased mobility, and environmental issues that threaten the existence of places dear to us (Relph, 1976; Sennet, 2000). It can be said that the main characteristic of attachment is the desire to keep proximity towards the object of attachment, or, in the words of Jorgensen & Stedman (2005), the notion of "place dependence". The focus lies in the effort of the individual to make this place as much of 'his/her own', to transform it into something as personal as possible.The place is meaningful and significant to people; it has unique identity and character to its inhabitants. They exhibit high degrees of involvement with the place, take on active roles and develop positive beliefs and emotions towards it that reflect their "place sensitivity", alloting to it "home identity" (Layder, 1993).

The connection betweeen identity and place attachment has been widely examined (Hernández, Hidalgo, Salazar-Laplace y Hess, 2007; Williams, 2008), yet it should be acknowledged that the relationship between the two concepts still remains obscure. Lewicka, (2011) and Scannell & Gifford, (2010) describe place attachment as the social ties people maintain with places, reinforcing the multi-dimensional character of the definitions by Altman & Low (1992). From a psychological perspective, place attachment describes "a strong affective bond that people develop towards a certain place where they tend to remain, feel comfortable and safe" (Hidalgo y Hernández, 2001, p. 274).

It is widely acknowledged that studies concerning place attachment are directly associated with community research. It is not surprising, then, that there should be an overlap between place attachment and sense of community (Kasarda y Janowitz, 1974; McMillan y Chavis, 1986). McMillan & Chavis (1986), on their part, defined the "sense of community" as "a sense of belonging, security, interdependence, mutual trust and commitment to the satisfaction of the needs of the other members of the community". Precisely, Long & Perkins (2007) exploring the concept of the "sense of community", produced a scale that includes measures like the number of people known in one´s own community, how they are influenced and what kind of feelings are experienced towards Others.

What makes a good place to live?

Following Lefebvre´s (1991) notion of representational spaces, we may analyse the process of the symbolic construction of place as lived by city dwellers through images that are influenced by a two-way process between the observer and the observed. This interplay requires the observer to select, organize, and endow with meaning what he/she sees. However, if we associate "sense of place" with personality, it is undeniable that there is much more to a city than its "character". The value of a city can also be related to its physical and spatial characteristics, which, in consonance with less tangible representations, contribute to create an image of the city. In fact, there are "public images" of cities constructed on the basis of the representations of a significant number of social actors and, although each picture is individual and personal, "yet it approximates the public image, which, in different environments, is more or less compelling, more or less embracing."(Lynch ,1960). Consultants usually advise cities to begin branding by cataloguing their strategic assets. Then, which are the attributes that city dwellers value? The literature suggests a number of qualities that are "the object of desire" for cities around the world:

a-**Legibility:** In a city that is articulate and readable, cityscape can be easily grasped as a consistently logical pattern. Wayfinding in such a place is an easy task because locations have an identity of their own, there are plenty of landmarks and orientation cues, not only for tourists but for citizens, as well.

b-**Fit:** The fit of a place reflects how well it suits the behaviour and customs of its inhabitants. It is a relational concept that binds spatial form and quality of living of a place with local idiosyncracies. Urban planners observe elements such as noise levels, lighting, tree density, timing, or even the density of visible stars at night when they consider making interventions in the urban setting. The point is that there is an interplay between these atributes and temperament and culture. Thus, the perception of the sense of a particular place depends on how city dwellers perceive the urban setting "respects" their essence, their idiosyncracies, their daily lives.

c-**Accessibility:** There is general consensus on the fact that one of the special advantages of cities is the open, unrestricted access they can provide. In fact, transportation and communications are central assets of an urban area. When transportation infrastructure offers a circulation system that is multi-modal, it definitely brings added value to users. This notion is consitent with the idea of making the places where we live into "destinations". In addition, cities which make consistent efforts to transform their settings into barrier-free spaces for the elderly and for people with disabilities are said to be accessible. Such policies imply making goods and services available and promoting a market of assistive devices. Building standards, for instance, are to adhere to universal design standards, which aim at designing products and spaces in a way that they can be used by the widest range of people possible.

d-**Education:** "A city with educated people where access to culture and to high-quality educational programs is guaranteed" (Puig, n.d.). Equal access to quality education and lifelong learning are pursued by recognising, in the first place, that education is a human right. Taking actions to redress asymmetries and to provide the best formative programs is empowering people to participate fully in society, to boost their self-esteem and, ultimately, to improve their quality of life.

e- **Multiculturality:** A plural city is a place where diversity is not only respected but considered an asset. The degree of openness or welcomeness, i.e. how permeable the community is to all sorts of people from all walks of life is, following Puig (n.d.), one of the indicators of success for a city. Yet, it is undeniable that in this "borderless world" the presence of alterity is often felt to be threatening. Levinas (1969) accounts for the disruption that the presence of the "stranger" may produce affecting settled people's sense of "being at home with oneself" (Levinas, 1969, quoted in Chambers, 1998:35). The truth is that while we are trapped by fearful responses to alterity, we miss the richness of intercultural experiences.

f- **Health and Vitality:** Such a place ensures equal access to health services and related facilities, promotes decent living conditions and prevents social exclusion. Yet, the notion of urban health may encompass other aspects of city life, including cleanliness, low or inexistent levels of corruption, low crime rates, affordability, or the necessary touch of city buzz. Residents who have a strong sense of the community usually see their city as a caring environment, which could be leveraged by promoting opportunities for people to build social connections around (service) projects or by encouraging participation in civic matters.

g- **Imageability:** "Image ability" is that quality in a physical object which gives it a high probability of evoking a strong vividly identified image in any given observer. From the urban planner's viewpoint, the shape and arrangement of a setting contains elements that are used to construct people's mental image of a city. Lynch (1960) mentions, for instance, paths, edges, districts, nodes or landmarks. However, Lynch's view of the concept of image is much more profound. In fact, it can be explained as "a picture especially in the mind", a sentimental combination between objective city image and subjective human thoughts. Therefore, the specific, physical environmental image of a place can be totally different from the different perspective of observers, which relate to attributes of structure and identity. When this imageability produces a visualization of the city that is embraced by all stakeholders, it becomes a brand.

h-**Participation:** A city which encourages citizens' involvement in public matters, ensures the removal of barriers to equal participation in civic life and leisure activities. Signs of a participatory society can be found in residents' commitment to their community through volunteerism and the construction of social networks between residents in NGOs. or other kinds of organisations.

i- **Uniqueness:** Another critical asset, though not easily achieved, is community distinctiveness. This impalpable quality of "oneness"does not only relate to the physical outlook of cities but also to the disposition of a community. It is connected with the spirit of a culture; the invisible emotional forces that inform beliefs, customs, or practices of a given social group.Thus, uniqueness lies in the ethos of the place and is said to be the goal of city branding.

j-**Innovation, expression and art:** A city where people can make contributions from their neighbourhoods, innovating in different fields such as the arts, technologies or social work is expressive and *alive*. Endowing the city with a voice of its own (a voice that nowadays can be broadcast and also *found* in social media), fostering creative collaboration, setting up "networks of doers", giving support to civic organizations may seem like an audacious plan, yet they are the tools that these fascinating times of

transformation and permanent change require. Such a city is a representational space (Lefebvre, 1991) where entrepreneurs take action and artists leave marks of "the inexpresable" in the public setting. This is a city where memory is alive and city dwellers embrace it through rituals, festivities, parades and multiple means of expression.

Method

The very essence of ethnographic qualitative work requires that the researcher systematically uses the senses, to reflect on the data gathered and analysed. If, as we have already suggested, understanding cities is like understanding metaphors, one needs to engage in a search for the common ground below the surface. Thus, the way to go about the task of "reading between the lines" of a city is to scout the city streets, sensing its pulse, undercovering its forms of experience. This "expedition" will, then, eventually consist of reconstructing such experiences from ethnographically collected data of actual human conduct, which includes photographic documents, drone images, opinion polls with residents, interviews with authorities and records from direct observation of the urban setting. It should be noted that 250 subjects were involved in the polls conducted, in even gender groups, within the age-range of 40-50 and belonging to middle-class socio-economic level.

Findings

The study found that certain factors are crucial in creating sense of place, namely,"emotional ties with family and other residents, opportunities for socializing, city fit and the city's openness to all kinds of people". The study revealed a high proportion of residents whose relatives and best friends live in the community, which definitely contributes to the strengthening of emotional ties and sense of attachment to the place. Respondents noted they saw their city as a place where "people care about each other" and create bonds "informally" in face-to-face interactions or the many social community events available where "it is easy to connect with people".The data also pinpoint that the most strongly attached residents (70% of interviewees) are more likely to want to stay in their current communities. Moreover, this is true for college graduates and other productive residents, who decide to return to their birthplace to raise their children in a more "peaceful" and "financially viable" environment.

The availability of parks, playgrounds, and trails makes the city fit for the idiosyncracies of its inhabitants. Following Blagovesta (2013), "besides lending themselves to people as a possibility for recreation, parks could serve as an active social space and locus of personal emotional attachment". Green areas appeared as meaningful, fully lived spaces that connect people; indicators of quality of living. As in many other inner cities in the area, effects of political and economic changes gave birth to places such as abandoned rail lines and old industrial warehouses. In Gálvez, they were reborn as green parks that lie in contrast to the iron framework of the pedestrian rail crossing that joins the two halves of the city. However, respondents were less likely to give positive ratings to the overall beauty or physical setting of the community, especially in what concerned order and cleanliness. Gálvez is evidently beautiful in an aerial shot of a drone, yet, surprisingly, not in the eyes of its citizens. Evidently, visual aesthetics of cityscapes are far from universal.

In people´s perceptions, the city´s permeability to different sorts of people, including families with young children, minorities, migrants and college graduates was high, which, for many, posed an advantage in the sense that communities that are more open to diversity seem to be better able to compete for talent. However, and despite the cultural plurality exibited by the respondents, the data also confirmed the inexistence of regulations, state programs or strategies to include migrants effectively. Schools expressed their concern for the lingüistic barriers, and for the absence of state policies that should contemplate intercultural contact. They also revealed that most children were adapting well, despite differences in the adaptation patterns across nationalities. In all cases, teachers manifested consistent interest in avoiding acculturation and promoting effective inclusion of the students in school life. They expressed they usually embarked on educational "expeditions" around the city to see it afresh, with new eyes. Yet, they noted that neither governance nor cultural centres were equipped to welcome students and cater for their learning needs. In addition, residents rated the educational services in their community higher than those of comparable communities in the region and remarked educators´ active involvement in cultural life.

With regard to imageability, respondents indicated that it was hard for them to assign a clearly delineated image to the city, although during the interviews they consistently mentioned a composite of characteristics contributing to character which also identify other small cities. In fact, inner cities in this area do have particular attributes of their own, namely, the friendly small town feel, the warm, open, welcoming people, the green spaces, the train station that divides the city in two, the impact of agrarian activities on economy, to mention but a few.

The results did not verify the initial assumption that there is a co-relation between levels of participation of citizenship and sense of place. The majority of the subjects interviewed informed they were not involved in any kind of organization, (only 20% participated actively in sports clubs or NGOs). What could be assumed, then, was that high participation rates might have no co-relation with sense of place. This was verified by conducting a cross examination of their answers to the two drivers (participation and sense of place).

Sense of place, however, did prove to be higher when residents agreed that their communities provide the social offerings and aesthetics they enjoy. In fact, social offerings constitute places for people to meet and foster a sense of community. Arts and culture give people new experiences, enjoyable moments and well-being. There is a lot of arts and culture available in Gálvez, and people take part in them fairly actively. Cultural activity is an important medium for the production of relational space, then the role of artists becomes a crucial one in the creation of city spaces that are either welcoming or alienating.

Concerning legibility, the drone images captured evidence of the lack of readability of Gálvez. Its layout appears to be quite inarticulate, which makes wayfinding a complex task because there are insufficient landmarks and orientation cues, not only for tourists but also for city dwellers. In addition, although the city is quite accesible from the outside (paved roads and routes are available), there are just a few assistive devices like ramps or barrier-free spaces for the disabled or elderly people. Moreover, most public buildings, fail to comply with accessibility and usability standards.

The study also explored a governance policy concerning accessibility and image which intended to imprint a new outlook of downtown Gálvez: a new barrier-free urban image. The "Renovation of the Central Area" project was launched by Municipal Governance and approved by the City Council. The regulation sustains that "the absence of public areas like the one created next to the local church accounts for the need to rescue and transform public space into a social meeting place and a site for cultural expression", justifying the project on the basis of "attaining general well-being, aesthetic good and the safeguard of landscape image" (Ord. N°3876/12). The project was based on the *need* of a more pedestrian-oriented central area that should facilitate walking to shops and parks. The proposal included paving streets adjacent to the church with cobblestones and leaving open gutters, except for the ones next to the area of the bars, which were covered to gain extra space for bar tables. The new pavements were elevated above the level of the other streets and the central square was re-designed. The Ordinance also enforced the removal of billboards and awnings on the streets of the central area and it regulated the features of the sidewalks so that they would eventually become uniform in material, level and design. The removal of shop-awnings, the most controversial issue, was based on the notion of "visual clutter"; an aesthetic issue which refers to the impact of pollution that impairs one's ability to enjoy a view by creating harmful changes in the natural environment.

The final outcome of the renovation has rendered the central area a clean place, but a space that is only "on display". The streets look renewed, yet, at the same time, they were stripped of their true atmosphere. Citizens, especially shop-owners affected by the measure, expressed their strong rejection of the policy. Social media-users immediately reacted criticizing this idea as insubstantial and harmful as it implied the destruction of city identity marks they valued.The renovation of the square, although considered "beautiful and modern" produced a displacement of its users to a park near the railway. Interviewees noted that there seems to be a mismatch between their perception of how the city can be "unique" and governance policies concerning urban planning. Finally, it might be pertinent to recall Relph´s (1976) argument about the fact that "designers who ignore the meanings that places bring to people's mind, try to destroy authentic places" and in doing so, produce culturally unidentifiable environments that are similar anywhere, which eventually turns them into inauthentic places".

Conclusions

The present study has revealed there is a correlation between asset strength of the inner city of Gálvez and sense of place. In fact, it could be generalized that the creation of inhabitants´ representational space in the city of Gálvez relies on their strong emotional ties with family and friends, opportunities for socializing, city fit and their appropriation of public spaces. Most highly attached residents share a vision of their community that recognises alterity and is open to different people. An authentic sense of belonging is said to be fostered in periodical celebrations, festivals and other cultural events; as social offerings constitute important factors to promote cultural interaction, a sense of pride and rootedness to the spatial setting. Communities where people experience art and culture as part of their lived-space generate a sense of well-being that makes the city fit and an enjoyable place to live. As sense of place is produced relationally, the role of social forces in the strengthening of people-place bonds should not be overlooked. Even though direct participation in social institutions

or organisations of different nature does not seem, in the era of numbing virtual consumption, to be a driving force, more indirect but equally effective forms of residents´ involvement have emerged. Finally, the challenge of real-life urbanity these days may be to engender a critical debate amongst decision makers in the light of the findings of urban culture studies. Governance plays a decisive role in people-place bonding, however there is evidence of certain incongruity between the residents´perception of the image of the city and governance policies concerning urban planning and strategic development. It is expected, then, that at least in the longer run, decision-makers will feel inspired to gain a new awareness of the potential of cities to support and nurture those features that make their communities unique and to foster in their people a sense of place that grows deep roots in their cities and, eventually, social conviviality.

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