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Place Attachment and the Value of Place in the Life of the Users

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Abstract

Place attachment is a form of connection between a person and the environmental setting. In the production of urban places, planners and designers mainly focus on the quality of the physical components. However, the aspects of meanings and attachment are not adequately considered in the planning and decision-making process. This study utilizes semi-structured interview method to examine place attachment dimensions in understanding the values of a place in the life of the users. Sample cases include examining attachment to streets in the city centre of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. It was evident that users' roles and ethnic backgrounds influenced their responses. Attachment to the places was economically, socially and culturally oriented and prevalent in their daily experience of the places, and the place memories recalled.

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1. Introduction

A review of related literature suggests that there are three major components of place: the physical form, activity and meaning (Punter, 1991). In the making of urban places, researchers emphasized on

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research related to sustaining the physical elements and activities. However the important function of meaning is less explored in urban studies. Meaning relates to the perceptual and the psychological aspects of environmental experience that forms place attachment.

The objective of this paper is to understand users' attachment to places within the city of Kuala Lumpur. It discusses the way in which people value a place based on qualitative inquiries. Using place-based approach, it focuses on the emotional sense of place embedded in the feeling, emotion and behaviour. Steadman (2003) noted that the physical features do not produce a sense of place directly, but influence the symbolic meanings of the landscape, which relates to the strength of place attachment. It is important to integrate the psychology of place in assessing place distinctiveness and values.

This paper advocates place-based approach and concepts in examining an attachment to urban places. Place is a space imbued with meanings (Relph, 1976). Relph explained that space and place are interconnected, where the physical aspects of space are ascribed meaning according to the values that people give to that place (Zakariya, Mohyuddin and Yaman, 2007). The physical and cultural characteristics combined with the individual's affective perceptions and functional needs shape place attachment (Bott, 2005). Place-based approach emphasises that the experience of place is not just physical but also perceptual and psychological and users (the public), and their experience and perception are the key source of evidence in understanding place attachment and place values. Place attachment is a positive element that can contribute to sustaining place identity, and the sense of place, thus promote emotional wellbeing, fulfilment and happiness to the urban users.

2. The value of place attachment

Relph (1976) described placelessness as an environment without significant places and the underlying attitude which does not acknowledge the significance in places. The globalisation of Malaysian cities is evident in the homogeneity of buildings' scales and appearances and the loss of traditional values (Shamsudin and Ujang, 2008). These transformations have influenced the way users experienced, perceived and felt about local places and their sense of psychological wellbeing. Here, the weakening of place identity could result in the loss of meaning and disrupts emotional attachment to place (Arefi, 1999). In the case of Kuala Lumpur city, the pressure from development and demands of urban tourism over the years has resulted in the physical transformations of public spaces, including historic open space (Zakariya and Harun, 2013). As a result, new developments particularly within the traditional setting transform constructed places and established place meanings embedded in the existing social and cultural setting.

Place attachment relates to the affective aspects of environmental meaning (Altman and Low, 1992). It is embedded in the affective bond or link between people or individuals and particular places (Hidalgo and Hernandez, 2001). It was evident in the interplay of affects and emotions, knowledge and beliefs, and behaviors and actions (Prohansky et al., 1983). Place attachment was evident in the functional bonding between people and places described as place dependence (Stokol and Shumaker, 1981). Hidalgo and Hernandez (2001) described, in the most basic form, the main characteristic of place attachment: the desire to maintain closeness to the object of attachment. It also describes the special feeling towards a particular place. This can be associated with elements of attraction, frequency of visits and level of familiarity.

Understanding on place attachment is important in sustaining the attraction and meaning of places. The aim is to avoid losing the characteristics that are familiar and meaningful to users that impact their continued attachment. Therefore, it enhances the value of a place as a social setting. Identification on elements that matter to users helps to ensure that any form of urban intervention will not discourage the users' daily engagement and threaten their sense of attachment to places they engage with. Human

experience and behaviour are developed through a network of memories and identities attached to the environment (Cheshmehzangi and Heath, 2012).

3. Influence of cultural characteristics

Racial, ethnic or class identity influences sense of attachment to a particular place (Rose, 1995). The idea suggests that meanings can be categorized based on the variation in the characteristics of the people. Therefore, there is a need to identify place attachment based on consensus from stratified user groups according to their roles and socio-cultural characteristics. In this context, ‘users’ are those who rely on public spaces or buildings for passive and active engagement (Hassanuddin, 2003 from Francis, 1989). The author also claimed that the length of association and frequency of engagement influence attachment. The users refer to those who frequently engage with (that indicates the level of familiarity) and rely on the places socially or economically (which indicates the level of dependency).

Culture, belief and past experience influence environmental perception (Rapoport, 1977). Culture relates to beliefs and perception, values and norms, customs and mode of appropriate behaviour constitute a cluster of characteristics (Altman and Low, 1992). This illustrates how place attachment involves culturally shared affective meanings and activities associated with a place that derived from socio-political, historical and cultural sources. It is a way of life, symbols, meaning and cognition and survival strategies accepted as norms. Riley (1992) discovered that the difference in landscape experience poses different form, types and degree of attachment for different cultural groups. In the case of a pluralistic society in Malaysian cities, the cultural principles play an important role in defining group identity hence influence the character and identity of the place they inhabited (Ujang, 2010).

4. Methods

The researcher had conducted face to face interview with 24 samples representing areas covering Jalan Masjid India (JMI), Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman (JTAR), Jalan Petaling (JP) and Jalan Bukit Bintang (JBB). The sampling is purposeful whereby people with specific characteristics, behaviour or experience were selected. It enables broad comparison to be made between different important groups of users. The strategy is appropriate for the city of Kuala Lumpur that has a multi-cultural society who gathers for different functions and purposes. Each street reflects particular ethnic group(s) observable through its thematic street image and the demographic profiles of its users (types of businesses, shop owners, street vendors and visitors). Criteria of samples considered include the users’ length of engagement with the streets, representative of ethnic population (Malay, Chinese, Indian and Indian Muslim) as the dominant groups occupying and visiting the streets, frequency of visit (minimum once a month) and familiarity (very familiar with the area). This paper focuses on the affective values of the places expressed in the feelings about the place, memory, sense of pride and belonging. The findings will be applicable to the studied areas which cover the major concentration areas in the city of Kuala Lumpur. The findings are discussed in light of the socio-cultural characteristics of the users and the established place attachment.

5. Findings and discussion

5.1. Place attachment

The emotional form of attachment can provide an indication of the actual value of the streets based on the affective reactions towards qualities associated with the places. The respondents expressed the sense

of happiness, positive impression, sentiment and care. Stronger feelings were felt in the form of a stronger sense of dissatisfaction towards arising issues affecting the places. Respondents from JMI and JP expressed sentiments towards the contestation of street vending area by illegal intruders, conflicting of interests and dissatisfaction on the physical changes and improvement. However, after the upgrading of both streets was completed, vendors and visitors acknowledged that the conditions of the street markets were better. It can be inferred that the motive of the negative reaction was mainly to protect the traders’ spatial ‘territory’ and from the domination of illegal traders in the area. In the case of JMI, the impact of changes has caused conflicting reactions from the streets’ users particularly the street vendors, the shop owners and the attached community members. The street vendors (with more than 20 years engagement with the street) as a living component of the place have contributed to the unique identity of the traditional shopping street. Table 1 summarizes the affective reactions towards the places.

Table 1. Emotional attachment indicators

Indicators	Place		
	JMITAR	JP	JBB
Happiness	Feel happy working/business in the area	Lively place and happy being there	Lively place and happy being there
	Happy with changes and improvement	Happy and satisfied with the physical changes	More entertaining spots
	Happy with the choices of goods and price range	Feel happy working/business in the area	More places to shop
		Enjoy the bustling atmosphere Happy looking at people peddling	More tourists and visitors
Positive impression	Positive about the ambiance of the place	Positive with the character of the place	Like the lively environment, full of people and vibrant
	Positive about creating better physical image	Like the street’s particular atmosphere that cannot be found in the shopping complexes	Suggest others to shop in the street
		Welcome promotion of the place for increased popularity Positive about the distinct atmosphere	
Sentiment-Care	Resistance to relocating the vendors	Resistance to relocating the vendors	Criticism on the lack of Malay businesses and lack of opportunities for Malay traders
	Feel upset if they are relocated to other less familiar location and isolated from the main pedestrian movement	Defensive about changes of physical settings	Felt that the place is more appropriate to youngsters and tourists
	Feel threatened with the decrease in visitors-reduced in monetary gain	Sensitive about the physical changes and the difficulty caused by it	Cleaner and more organised spaces
	Sentiment over changes	Care about the cleanliness	
	Defensive about changes of physical settings	Strong social connection and bonding due to engagement to similar types of activities and similarcultural group	
	Concern on degree of crime and social ills and economic sustainability of own group	A place of social interaction based on family oriented economic activities	
	Concern about drug addiction activity and vandalism of facility Contested space		

The respondents shared not only their knowledge about the places but also sentiments, pride, loyalty and love of the places. Their commitment was strongly associated with the roles of the place in developing the sense of 'ownership' and 'territoriality' reflecting the self and group identity. Parallel with the emotional attachment, other form of attachment, which are the functional and social attachment also developed due to frequency and length of engagement. Shoppers expressed the feeling of enjoyment with the distinct atmosphere of the streets strongly manifested in the activity and well supported by the spatial and physical setting of the place. In this regard, diversity has affected the resident's attachments as it affords different types of social interaction and various types of good selection (Harun et. al, 2013). The mixture of users (local and foreign tourists) creates diversity of activities (Ja'afar et. al., 2012). This is parallel to Relph's theory (1976) that the sense of place is embedded in the feelings and perceptions that people have through experience of a place as well as referring to the qualities of a place that make it distinctive from other places. The cultural spaces imbued people's way of life and devoted cultural phenomenon are essential to build a place identity (Lai, 2013).

5.2. The influence of culture and ethnicity

Attachment to the places is reflected emotionally with the influence of the physical and the cultural characteristics of the people and the setting. Cultural identity defines and distinguishes one ethnic group's setting from another. It was apparent that the cultural expression strongly manifested during festivals associated with each ethnic group through the items sold and the general atmosphere of the shopping streets. The atmosphere influenced for the users' attachment and memorable experiences. Hari Raya or Eid, a celebration for the Muslims across culture after a month long of fasting transforms the image of the shopping streets except JP where the majority of traders are Chinese. Here, the Malay and the Indian Muslims celebrate the festival every year as cultural symbols and religious practices. The products distinct to the streets (JMI-TAR, JP) indicate the dominance of the ethnic group rooted from the early ethnic settlement.

The cultural influence strongly manifested in the respondents' sense of belonging and meaning associated with the places. The Indian Muslim respondents in JMI associated the attachment to others from similar ethnic background. Through observation and supported by the statement in published materials, there is an established sense of community expressed by the users regulated by daily religious practices in the Indian Mosque. The meanings, therefore, varied according to the cultural background of the users. The streets become the channel to the continuity of self and community identity. (JMI-TAR and JP) Findings indicate that the Indian Muslims and the Indians indicate a stronger attachment indication to the places and the people within it. It is also true to JP and JTAR as traditional streets. JBB manifests the mixture of cultural content that is influenced by the western and modern lifestyles. The 'globalised' culture has almost diminished the ethnic root established in the early settlement of the area. This conundrum has been discussed by Gunn (1994) where the making, or re-making, of places need to reinforce the essence that makes the place what it is, while giving it new values physically and psychologically. In summary, the influence of culture in shaping the character of a place is strongly evident in the traditional streets. The distinct traditional products characterize the distinctiveness of the street rooted in the ethnic expression. An attachment varied between ethnicity in JMI-TAR. The Indian Muslim and Indian respondents indicated stronger emotional and socio-cultural attachment compared to the Malay respondents. To describe the difference, the Indian Muslims are the key users involved in the trading activities and occupied the premises along JMI-TAR. Their sense of belonging was evident in the social interaction among the Indian Muslims and religious commitment. Interviews with respondents from JMI-TAR indicate that the length of engagement, family-inherited businesses and socio-cultural bonding enhance the attachment. Chinese respondents (shop owners) from JP experienced similar

regarding improvement of the place. In the case of JBB, the findings suggest that the Malay and Chinese respondents share common feelings about the streets and less influenced by conflicting interests and negative emotional responses towards local issues. This may be contributed to the generic identity of the modern appearance of JBB.

In summary, the ethnic identity and related economic and social issues influence users' attachment to the shopping streets. It contributes to the sense of place. This concurs with the theories that a strong sense of attachment to a particular place influenced by racial and ethnic identity Rose (1995). The culture of the people influences the environmental reaction towards a setting (Rapoport, 1977).

5.3. Place memory

Demographic factors such as age, gender, and ethnic play an important role in prescribing one's attachment and ability to remember of certain things or events (Othman et. al., 2013). Place memory indicated the significance of the place to one's life experience. The finding shows that particular experiences recalled by the respondents that evoked their emotions. Those included the main physical and social changes together with a particular moment of interaction with certain types of customers (shoppers). It also includes childhood memory of being in the streets with family, exciting festive and entertaining environment, cultural events, relocation due to the physical improvement, confronting intruders and the experience of stolen belongings. The following statements reflect the memory associated with JMI-TAR:

“Dulu JTAR yang paling dulu berkembang dan dikenali, sekarang sampai ke JMI sebab tambah ramai orang India dan Melayu”. “In the past, JTAR was the first to develop and known, it was then extended to JMI because of the coming of more Indians and Malays”. (Malay Respondent 10: Resident, 15 years of engagement) JMI

Continuity of place attachment embedded in the memory, however, continues to be threatened by the transformation of places. Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman popularly known as Batu Road, holds fond memories for city folks who used to shop at the popular street during the early 1960s and 1970s. Today, it is struggling to keep up with the image of modern shopping malls (Star Metro, 25 Oct 2005).

Memories mentioned by respondents in JP associated with shared activities and the physical changes. The memories include shopping with the parent during childhood, the changing of the place as compared to the present, going to the cinema close to JP during younger years with friends, buying traditional Chinese candies, taking daily 'tea and coffee' with other neighbouring traders and memory of running a stall with the late parents. The following responses indicate the moments:

“I can recall my everyday life of waking up early and arranging my wares; and my daily 'tea and coffee' with neighbouring stalls and shops”. (Chinese Respondent 3: Shopkeeper, 26 years of engagement).

In summary, familiarity and frequent engagement developed sense of belonging expressed by strong emotional feelings. It was translated in the form of pride due to the distinct characteristics of the places and sense of ownership to trading spaces as well as an attachment to the economic and religious practices. The symbolic importance of a place as a repository for emotions and relationships give meaning and purpose to life. According to Kamalipour et. al (2012), community attachment is significant, and neighbourhoods play the most prominent role in people's attachment to the place. Places have different

levels of sense of place that contribute to social activities based on the relationships of place meaning (Nik Muhamad et. al, 2013). Table 2 summarizes meanings associated with the places as expressed by the respondents.

Table 2. Meanings of place

Indicators	Place		
	JMITAR	JP	JBB
Loyalty	<p>Not willing to move due to its strategic location and a pedestrian route</p> <p>Wish to stay because of familiarity with people and long term engagement</p> <p>Long for ambiance of the place</p>	<p>Unwilling to move to other place due to being accustomed with the place</p> <p>Unwilling to leave the place if given a choice because the business has been established in the street</p> <p>Unwilling to move to other places due to having many friends</p> <p>Continuing business from generations</p> <p>Attachment due to frequent visits</p>	<p>Will not move to other places because of feeling comfortable and satisfying living in the area</p> <p>Not willing to move to other places due to good business and familiarity with people and the area</p> <p>Prefer to settle in the area after retirement due to familiarity</p>
Pride	<p>Sense of pride due to popularity and distinctiveness</p> <p>Strong attachment to the mosque as symbols of community</p> <p>Strong sense of ownership and bonding due to longer period of engagement</p>	<p>Sense of pride due to popularity and distinctiveness</p> <p>Suggested people to visit the place more</p> <p>Proud of the special quality of the place as compared to other places in KL</p> <p>Proud of the place due to its uniqueness</p> <p>Proud of the specialty of traditional food and eateries</p> <p>It is special as a tourist attraction</p> <p>Proud to run a business in the street.</p> <p>It's a family legacy.</p> <p>Proud with relationship with other traders (friends) working in the area</p> <p>Be able to business in the street is a privilege and respected by others</p>	<p>Proud of the old Hotel Malaya and notice the physical changes in the street</p> <p>Proud of the popularity of the streets to foreign tourists</p> <p>I am proud of this place because it's the place I worked from my younger days</p>
Love	<p>Love the place and wish to stay and work there as long as possible</p>	<p>Love the place and know very well about the place</p> <p>Love the place and like to feel the atmosphere</p>	<p>Love the place for a walk and window shopping and observing people and activities</p> <p>Love to walk and shop because there are a lot of shopping complexes</p>

(Source:Semi-structured interview)

6. Conclusion

Place attachment provides an indicator of the significance and meaning of a place to the immediate users. The significance in identifying users according to their demographic characteristics and roles is an appropriate approach in understanding the actual values of a place to a specific group of users. It is also to examine their sensitivity and concern towards the places. This understanding will assist the implementation process in the intervention projects concerning various types of users occupying the business premises that regard the places (streets) as significant in sustaining the economy and the cultural

identity. This is to secure attachment of the people to their environmental setting. In this case, it can be concluded that place attachment will contribute to the preservation of local place identity and continuity of personal and cultural identity.

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