

“We love this place”: place attachment and community engagement in urban conservation planning

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Conservation planning becomes significant as globalisation and rapid urbanisation challenge the preservation of historical urban sites. As an integral part of communities' place identities, the destruction of built heritage for development challenges local identities. Protecting built environment heritages can preserve local identity. Also, a paradigm shift in conservation planning supports including local perspectives and knowledge systems for sustainable urban conservation planning and democratic participation processes.

Community engagement in urban conservation planning offers town planners insight into emotional values that communities attach to built heritages for incorporation in physical planning proposals. Emotional attachments are traditionally not considered as valid constructs in public participation. However, place attachments can propel communities to constructively participate in development processes if such developments strengthen their place identity, or prompt obstruction if communities perceive developments as threats to place identity.

This research aims to explore communities' place attachment through community engagement to inform urban conservation planning proposals. An action research approach was followed to explore place attachments associated with built heritage resources in two South African communities, Khuma and Stilfontein.

The research indicates that specifically socio-economic, natural, and aesthetic place attachments assisted the communities to envision urban conservation proposals for future built environments for Khuma and Stilfontein that will be cherished. These proposals were unique for each community due to different underlying place attachments. The implication of this research is that urban conservation should acknowledge communities' place attachments, as they can optimise the fit between communities and urban conservation efforts.

Keywords: place attachment, community engagement, public participation, urban and regional planning, built environment heritage.

Introduction and background

The United Nations [1] projected that in 2012 three billion of the world's seven billion human population will reside in urban areas. By 2030 the number of people living in towns and cities will have risen to over 60% of the world population. Currently more people live in urban areas than in rural areas [2]. Rising urban populations are due to natural population increase, urban-rural migrations, and inter-urban migrations [2, 3]. In developing countries urban-rural migration contributes significantly to rapid urbanisation. This means an increasing development pressure to provide houses and infrastructure [2] to keep up with the demand for rising living standards [2, 3]. Also, with

increasing transportation stresses and sustainable urban development approaches calling for higher density developments, the case for urban conservation becomes more urgent [3] as old neighbourhoods often have to make way for modern landscapes. Globalisation is often considered as a reason for the disappearance of unique older urban features when fashionable international architectural styles are imposed on areas, regardless whether they fit in with the local character of places or not. Competition for resources to sustain economic growth [4] is another challenge for urban conservation due to development pressure that — if handled injudiciously — can damage or destroy places that have significant meaning for community members [5].

In general, there seems to be a struggle to balance urban development with urban conservation, without due consideration of the effect of the changing urban environment on its community. According to Townsend and Whittaker [6], “a place is borne of an interpreted engagement with time, stories, associations, people, buildings, structures, objects, ‘natural’ features”. Individuals form emotional bonds with places in which their life happens because these places sustain them physically and emotionally. Often these bonds are expressed as place identity and place attachment. Place attachment refers to the affective bonds people develop to a place and that contribute to personal satisfaction, creativity, privacy, security, and serenity [7], while place identity refers to how these bonds contribute to an individual’s self-bestowed value and how others view this person [8]. Although physical places are not the sole reason for a person’s happiness and identity, they do contribute to them and removal of such places can influence the former.

Urban development that does not respect the existing urban structure and the social character of a community can change the built environment in such a way as to affect the meaning of a specific place. Such changes can be experienced positively or negatively by different sections of a community [9]. Williams and Patterson [10] identified four broad meanings that can be attached to places and can therefore also be threatened by inconsiderate development: *aesthetic meanings* (meanings that are emotionally evocative), *instrumental meanings* (meanings that reflect economic goals), *cultural meanings* (meanings that are emotional, symbolic, or spiritual in nature), and *expressive meanings* (meanings that are related to a sense of self and identity). Changing place meanings can influence place identity and place attachments. Loss of significant urban places can therefore severely disrupt the place attachment of community members, creating feelings of a disruption, loss, and alienation [11, 12]. In severe cases, loss of significant places can unravel a whole community’s social structure [13]. Physical planning and design should therefore take cognisance of people’s attachment to places when pressure for development arises, as these may be important issues to incorporate in the future planning of areas.

Planning in this article is based on Patsey Healey’s definition of the act of planning, whereby planning is the “explicit and publicly justified efforts to shape both spatial organization...and the way place identities are produced and maintained in order to achieve and sustain particular values” [14]. It is therefore the act of including built heritage in any planning action for a specific area with the aim of retaining the place identities and values of the area in question and refers to conservation

planning. When seen in the light of creeping development pressure and gentrification of old town centres [2, 3], the purpose of conservation planning is therefore to prevent the destruction of or unsuitably modifying of built heritage, while still enabling development of an area.

The value of built heritage does not lie purely in its physical structure, but also in the diverse socially constructed and intangible meanings attached to it [15]. When built heritage is destroyed, the feeling of loss can be acute, especially as built heritage is considered an intrinsic part of individual and communal identity formation [4]. When planning proposals threaten to disrupt or destroy place meanings, values, attachments, and identity, the public reaction is often expressed as resistance against planning proposals, regardless of the possible value such proposals can offer the community [11, 12]. As public participation is enforced by some South African planning legislation, public resistance can incur unforeseen litigation costs and time delays in the planning process [16].

As such, place meanings and attachments cannot be identified by conservation experts or planners alone, but through joint community engagement [6, 17, 18]. A paradigm shift in conservation planning supports the inclusion of local perspectives and knowledge systems for sustainable urban conservation planning and democratic participation processes [19–21]. This concurs with the communicative turn in planning theory, wherein public participation is considered as an essential element of the planning process [22]. Increasing engagement with communities means that planners will more frequently come in contact with emotional aspects that underlie spatial development [23]. Because emotional ties to place are strong driving forces behind a community’s acceptance or resistance to development and/or historical preservation, it is important for planners to acknowledge these in urban conservation efforts.

The aim of this article is therefore to explore place attachments to built environment heritage resources in two former mining communities, Khuma and Stilfontein, North West Province, South Africa, through community engagement.

Research context

The research is part of a larger project that aimed to identify and prioritise potential built heritage resources for spatial planning purposes in the City of Matlosana, North West Province, South Africa [24]. The study areas, Khuma and Stilfontein, fall within the municipal boundaries of the City of Matlosana. Stilfontein was established as a gold mining town in 1949 by British Settlers, whose influence was especially prominent in the social class stratification of the population. Khuma was

established in 1950 to serve as domestic satellite township to Stilfontein during South Africa’s *apartheid* era. This town housed not only mining workers, but also individuals forcefully removed from a distant area under the Group Areas Acts of the *apartheid* regime and re-established in Khuma.

Research method

Research approach

Due to the socially constructed nature of the research topic — place attachment — a qualitative research approach was followed. This made it essential to interact with the Khuma and Stilfontein communities to explore the emotional values assigned to each township’s built heritage. An action research approach was used to obtain thick descriptions regarding place attachments associated with built heritage. Similar research approaches were successfully used in previous research in the Vredefort Dome World Heritage Site in order to link intangible environmental aspects with physical locations for planning purposes [25–28].

Research participants

Participants in both communities were purposively selected and contacted through a key informant from each community. Participants were individuals that were perceived as having the ability to provide an in-depth understanding of built heritage resources in the study area and the emotional values associated with these places [29]. Data was collected during four separate focus group discussions on four different days, two discussions per community with varying numbers of participants. In Stilfontein eight Afrikaans and English speaking individuals (three females and five males, ages between 54 and 80 years) participated in the first focus group session and eleven (six females, five males) in the second session. In Khuma, the first session had ten Setswana, Sotho, and Xhosa speaking participants (two females and eight males, aged between 23 of 83 years) and the second session had twelve participants. All participants were residents of Stilfontein and Khuma for at least ten years respectively, and all provided their informed consent and were free to withdraw from the research at any time.

Research process

Participants were grouped around a table and were given culturally sensitive materials (clay, straw, and coloured beads) to create a visual presentation based on a research question¹. The initial focus group sessions were centred around the following verbal prompt: *With all the objects*

in front of you, please make a visual presentation of anything that comes into your mind when you think of the places in your community that you want to see existing in the future for your children.

After completing their models, participants had to explain the significance and meanings associated with each presentation. Member checking happened concurrently to ensure the accuracy of the findings during the collection of the data. The responses of the participants were audio taped and the visual presentations photographed.

The second set of focus group discussions used the same culturally sensitive materials, but instead of making individual presentations, participants were asked to create a presentation based on a communal understanding of the following research question. This was done on a layout plan of the relevant township²: *Think about the [built heritage] sites that you see here (indicated on the layout plan). You can do anything with, between and around these. How would you like the whole area to look like in future for your children and their children?* Participants completed their visual presentations and were thereafter asked to explain the significance and meanings associated with the presentations. The responses were audio taped and the presentations photographed. All verbatim data was transcribed and translated where necessary.

Data analysis

The transcribed data was analysed using content analysis, which is a useful analysis method for discovering and documenting emotional values associated with built environment heritage resources as contained within large amounts of textual data [29]. Latent coding was used to reveal subjective meanings and themes and to systematically locate them in the text [29]. The coding process was open, allowing themes and meanings to appear relatively freely from the texts under the broader themes of ‘place meanings’ and ‘place attachment’. Specific places named in the texts acted as geographical reference points for expressed place meanings and place attachments. After the initial coding, the themes were further refined into subcategories, such as land uses for the ‘places’ theme, e.g. institutional, commercial, residential and social land uses.

Findings

The emerging themes strongly centred on places in and around Stilfontein and Khuma (Table 1).

¹ This research method is known as the MmogoTM method [30].

² This data collection technique differs from the MmogoTM method and should not be confused with the MmogoTM method.

Table 1. Place attachment experienced at various locations in Stilfontein and Khuma (Source: Authors' own composition, 2012).

Place attachment	Location
Social place attachment	Mining-related places Social spaces Institutional places Streets Trees Stilfontein Rose
Economic place attachment	Mining-related places Stilfontein Rose
Natural place attachment	Trees Stilfontein Rose
Aesthetic place attachment	Social spaces Trees Stilfontein Rose Municipal fountain

Social place attachment

In both communities social attachments constituted the bulk of place attachments. Mining-related places, such as the local gold mine's mine shafts and residential quarters featured strongly in the discussions of participants. The mine shafts were seen to have historical value, as they acted as physical evidence of the continuity of development in both communities. The residential quarters (single hostels and married quarters for the mine workers in Khuma) symbolised places of remembrance of life in a mining community. Khuma participants identified the residential buildings as not important, but rather the site where these buildings are located, as the run-down hostels currently attract crime. For the Stilfontein participants the mine houses acted as symbols of social status, signifying how interactions between various mine employees happened in the past.

Social spaces, such as the old drive-in theatre (now disused), public parks, schools, the municipal fountain, and sport facilities, existing or disused, also formed a strong point of reference to social place attachments. The old drive-in theatre in Stilfontein and the demolished public swimming pool in Khuma recalled a nostalgia from times gone by, especially the swimming pool, as its site was (and still is) a physical landmark and a symbolic place that bridge the past and the present. Part of the nostalgia experienced by the community members from Khuma with regards to the pool, is the fact that the pool was a site of intergenerational socialisation, now forever gone. Schools, too, signify places of socialisation between young and old.

In terms of institutional places, the local police stations were pointed out as important landmarks. In Khuma participants felt that the old police station has no historical value, but rather value for the physical site

where upon it stands. They adamantly stated that the property must in the future be used for community services, hence its current significance. In Stilfontein the civic building complex was once a source of pride for the community, but lack of maintenance reduced its social value.

Transport infrastructure, like streets, traffic circles, and the highway, were identified as having a special sort of social attachment for both Stilfontein and Khuma residents. These movement routes and objects are important for their ability to orientate strangers and townfolk alike and seem reminiscent of the paths of Kevin Lynch's perception and wayfinding research in urban environments [31].

Public parks contributed to a rural and enjoyable feeling within the built-up boundary of Stilfontein. In the past, the parks were locations of socialisation and relaxation, though in more recent times the neglect of the parks diminished their social value. The town's special rose, the Stilfontein Rose, is a source of civic pride, while the *Kameeldoring* tree (repeatedly pointed out during the focus group sessions), currently acts as open-air classroom for art classes.

In the past, the man-made fountain that forms part of the existing civic building complex in Stilfontein added social value by being a site for displaying public art. However, lack of upkeep from the local municipality eroded the social value of the fountain and currently no public art is on display.

Economic place attachment

The mine shafts elicited a strong feeling of economic attachment for both Stilfontein and Khuma participants, as the mine represents the economic growth of the region and a source of income.

In the past, Stilfontein was the location of an annual Rose Festival, now discontinued. The town's Stilfontein Rose was once planted in profusion in the town's public space. Poor maintenance by the local authority reduced the number of rose bushes, but participants felt that if the Rose Festival could be held annually again, the Stilfontein Rose can become a source of economic growth.

Natural place attachment

The Stilfontein participants identified a *Kameeldoring* and a *Kurkeik* tree near the town centre as important natural landmarks. The uniqueness of the trees, usually found only in great numbers in the wild and not singly as in town, as well as the health-giving benefits of trees were discussed during the focus group sessions. According to the participants, the Stilfontein Rose added a feeling of being in nature, while in reality being in a built-up area. The rose is an important part of the public identity

of the town, and when discussed it elicited a visible sense of pride from the participants, coupled with feelings of nostalgia and a sense of loss at the neglected status of the roses. However, participants were determined that this specific rose must continue to be a part of town as a shared living heritage object for future generations.

Aesthetic place attachment

Finally, the rose also features as a source of aesthetic place attachment and as a symbol of the townspeople’s public identity. The roses, coupled with the trees, beautify the environment and participants expressly stated that the roses and indigenous trees must form part of beautifying the social spaces in town in the future.

Also, the Stilfontein participants argued, the public parks must be upgraded so that they can act as socialisation and prettifying places once more. Just as the public parks were beautiful in the past and since neglected, so too can the Stilfontein municipal fountain once more be repaired to boost civic pride.

Participants from Khuma expressed no aesthetic attachment to any place in their town during the focus group sessions.

Discussion

Clearly, in both areas the participants wanted their communities to continue growing economically. Their location within the larger region run by the City of Matlosana, and their proximity to the nearby highway, the N12 Treasure Route, requires development for the sake of economic sustainability. Simultaneously, proactive conservation planning is necessary for protecting places that inhabitants developed a deep attachment to over years. A proactive approach meant that we had to follow a creative way — other than the single dimensional approach prescribed by planning legislation — to determine *what* the communities defined as meaningful and historical places and *why* these places are considered as significant. These ‘what’ and ‘why’ questions were answered by community members themselves during the community engagement sessions: the participants identified their own significant places with visual presentations and afterwards verbally explained their meanings.

Using qualitative and intensive sessions with the community members as participants allowed for input from grass root level. Thick descriptions helped to understand the emotional attachments to place in an in-depth manner. Feelings are personal and subjective and their intensity difficult or impossible to capture with quantitative research techniques in planning [27, 28], e.g. describing the feelings of loss and nostalgia. The method used in this research linked emotional attachments to specific places as identified by the

participants’ visual presentations. These presentations made it possible to spatially locate these attachments on a map of each area, in essence ‘concretising’ intangible emotions for spatial planning purposes.

Once the sites with their attachments were identified, they were plotted on a map for spatial analysis to indicate spatial patterns (physical and visual proximity, as well as location with regards to movement patterns and other facilities) and formulate future proposals with regard to heritage sites [24]. In some cases, especially in Khuma, places with emotional attachments were clustered around and in close proximity of the central business area, making it possible to propose a balanced preservation/conservation zone. This preservation/conservation zone was inspired by the way Khuma residents expressed their place attachment: it is not the *structure* on a site that is important, but rather the *physical location*. Upgrading or redevelopment of these sites were considered as important, as long as it was done in a way that did not negate the meanings currently held for the residents.

Stilfontein participants, in contrast, expressed a preservation orientation towards places they felt attached to. In the spatial proposals, for example, the civic building complex and surrounding area were identified as a preservation zone in dire need for visual improvement and maintenance. The *structure* must be kept in future development, but the *physical site* must be improved.

The attachments expressed reflect the meaning categories as identified by Williams and Patterson [10]. Place attachments formed through aesthetic meanings were conveyed for various social spaces, the municipal fountain, and the trees and Stilfontein Rose. Instrumental meanings were captured in the economic attachments connected to the local gold mine and the rose. Place attachments with cultural meanings were expressed for mining-related places, social and institutional spaces, streets, and the unique local flora. Expressive meanings were reflected in participants’ attachment to the previous glory of the municipal building complex and the rose as symbol of civic identity. On our own, we as researchers could not have identified all the significant places, nor determined the significance of these places for the community. Without community engagement, the places loved by Stilfontein and Khuma residents might not have been included in the conservation planning proposals and the loss of important heritage, and its coupled place attachment, would most certainly have been a reality. However, as conservation planning does not happen in a vacuum, the community proposals and subsequent implementation need to be discussed further with other role-players such as the local authority and private sector individuals who contribute to the physical development process.

Conclusion

With conservation planning becoming more community-centred, the importance of emotional aspects, such as place attachment and place meanings, may become important in planning research in the future. Though legislation and conservation policies can offer valuable guidelines for the identification of built heritage, the planner will have to become more creative in cases where built heritage is difficult to identify due to its subjective nature. Planners cannot act in isolation — community engagement is essential because of the multitude of meanings and attachments associated with significant places. Total consensus about built heritage meanings and place attachments might not be reached in the sense of communicative planning, but collaboration between planners and communities can make it possible to include emotionally significant places in development efforts and proposals that are currently difficult to achieve due to technical and legal constraints. However, we foresee that the most challenging aspect for development professionals in practice is to come to terms with the importance of acknowledging intangible place attachments and meanings as an essential part of the built environment.

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