1. Place matters

Frank Vanclay

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Making sense of ‘place’

‘Place’ is generally conceived as being ‘space’ imbued with meaning. Thus, it refers more to the meanings that are invested in a location than to the physicality of the locality. Sometimes, though, it is the biophysical characteristics that are important in being a foundation for those personal meanings. Landmarks and significant features in the landscape contribute to sense of place by providing an icon to which symbolic meaning can be ascribed. Thus, Mount Wellington, towering over Hobart (Figure 1.1), becomes the representation of place for many Hobartians. Constructed landmarks can function in much the same way. For example, the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Opera House could easily be significant for people in Sydney (see Chapter 23). Locations where people gather to play or to meet and share stories, such as parks, shopping malls, cafes and pubs, can also become special because of their social meaning. Certain locations can also develop a special quality because of the type of experiences people have there. The spot where a first kiss or a marriage proposal took place or the location of the honeymoon might be special forever. Locations where people go for holidays, their favourite fishing spot, or some favoured spot where they find solace (see Chapter 21) all give a sense of what is meant by ‘place’. Place, therefore, is the coming together of the biophysical, social and spiritual worlds. Simply put, place is space that is special to someone. The personal meanings that turn space into ‘place’ become embedded in people’s memories and in community stories. They can be associated with both positive and negative feelings.

Figure 1.1. Looking across the Derwent River to Hobart, Tasmania, with Mount Wellington towering above. Photograph by James Middleton
Place-making is the process of transforming 'space' (that is, no-place) into 'place' and can occur at individual and institutional levels. Place-making is also the process of transforming bad places into good places, of changing the way people feel about a place. Architects and builders can attempt to enhance place characteristics by physical manipulation of the space, and regional development organisations can create promotional material to attempt to change the way people feel about a location. Community groups can hold festivals and other events which also assist in helping people form and shape their feelings about a place. Ultimately, however, it is individuals themselves who must connect with a locality — who must develop their personal attachment to place. 'Place' exists when the individual can tell a story about a specific locality, something that indicates personal meaning. Place exists when 'house' becomes 'home'. Places exist when we start naming them.

I agree with Thomas Gieryn\(^2\) that 'place' can be anything that has the following 'necessary and sufficient features': geographic location (whether spot, area or linear form), material form (physicality) and investment with meaning and value (positive or negative). Thus while there is talk of virtual places, the body as place, and 'place' as any site of human engagement or activity, I believe this diminishes the concept of place. Gieryn's three conditions are all necessary.

Because place is personal, a particular location can contain a range of meanings — different people will have varying views about the meaning of a place. Thus there are pluralities of place. When spaces are modified, or access to some favourite location denied, there can be opposition and conflict. Even a derelict building can have special meaning to someone. No change in the landscape or cityscape will ever be free of conflict or opposing views. Because one group's use of a place can impact on other groups, there will often be 'use conflicts'. This frequently happens in public access areas where there are multiple uses and many users. With outdoor recreation activities, for example, there can be much conflict over the use of motorised activities (all-terrain vehicles, jet skis, ski mobiles, motorbikes, generators in camping grounds, and so on). Recreation research shows that these motorised vehicle users can profess a strong sense of place to the locations they visit. There can also be conflict between mountain-bike riders and walkers over the use of trails. For park rangers, managing these conflicts is difficult. How can they decide whose place claims are authentic or more valid?

Place includes all the environmental qualities and values of a locality since these are assigned to that space by people. Thus, the perceived ambience of a location, its perceived safety and security, the level of background noise, any evident odours, the level of ambient light, and the view and the elements in that view (and more) are all part of what makes up the personal experience of space, and therefore are part of place.\(^3\)

Places are rarely static and are frequently dynamic. If they change in a way that the beholder does not like, one consequence can be a reduction in 'place attachment', or a reduced 'sense of place'. However, a person's attachment to place can be enhanced by their investment of effort
in changing it. It might be argued that house renovations are not needed to improve one's standard of living, but rather to increase one's quality of life by increasing our connection with where we live.

Sometimes, a person's connection to place might be because of periodic (usually cyclic) change: for example, the changes that occur from the pre-dawn calm, through the dawn chorus, to the heat of the midday sun; or the changes associated with the setting sun and the coming of the evening and night. A person might connect with a place because of the changing seasons. For example, in south-east Australia it might be the autumn colours, the green of winter, or the spring bulb blooms. In northern Australia it might be the pleasantness of the winter 'dry' or even the dramatic November thunderstorms.

Because of the personal dimension of place, it defies definition other than by general understanding — but it should be noted that both 'place' and 'sense of place' are terms readily understood by the general public. Nevertheless, definitions are sometimes necessary, especially when it comes to legislation and regulation. Article 1.1 of the Burra Charter (an international agreement about the protection of cultural heritage), for example, considers that 'place means site, area, land, landscape, building or other work, group of buildings or other works, and may include components, contents, spaces and views'. The explanatory notes indicate that 'the concept of place should be broadly interpreted. The elements described in Article 1.1 may include memorials, trees, gardens, parks, places of historical events, urban areas, towns, industrial places, archaeological sites and spiritual and religious places'.

It seems to me, however, that such a definition, while perhaps adequate for the purposes of discussing cultural heritage, fails to do full justice to the concept of place.

Despite suggestions of the transcendence of place,\(^5\) the growth of placelessness in society,\(^6\) as well as a growing critical awareness of the negative aspects of place,\(^7\) place remains fundamentally important to our sense of identity, our sense of community, and our humanity.\(^8\) We would be lost without it.

**Making sense of ‘place-making’**

Place-making can involve investment in physical alteration of the landscape and/or setting, but more importantly requires symbolic investment.\(^9\) The narratives told about a location in order to enhance its appeal as a place to visit, to see, to be, or to live, speak of the special qualities of that place — what sets that place apart from other places and what makes individuals want to be there. Individuals do this too. In telling stories about our places, we create and re-create; revise and adjust; confirm and re-confirm; affirm and re-affirm our connections to place.\(^10\) Storytelling is a way in which any place becomes 'our place' or 'our patch', where we assert some authority, or ownership, or at least some connection to a place. Storytelling, of course, is
not an individual activity. For a story to be told, there must be an audience. And an audience provides feedback, validating and affirming the experience. So the symbolic meaning of place comes out of the discourse even if it has individual meaning.\textsuperscript{11}

Place-making happens at multiple levels and in multiple ways. Not only individuals and institutions, but also communities and community groups may hold activities to build and celebrate their connection to place. The Mountain Festival in Hobart (Figure 1.2) is one example of a community-based activity that seeks specifically to build awareness of place through a range of community arts events, exhibitions, and a ‘walks and talks’ program. Many communities have a range of events from local show days and fairs, to celebrations of anniversaries, that all seek to build community pride and a sense of belonging.

While planned events are important to place-making, it can also occur in response to sudden changes such as natural disasters, or external threats such as development projects. While one of the social impacts of development can be the loss of sense of place for some members of the community, it is also the case that joining forces to fight a particular development proposal can make people start to appreciate what they have and to build their sense of place and social capital as they rally against the project.
Making sense of ‘sense of place’

If ‘place’ is difficult to define, ‘sense of place’ is even more so, and there is a degree of confusion or misuse surrounding the term. ‘Sense of place’ refers to the individual, not to the place. While the characteristics of a location may affect how people feel, and changing the physical characteristics can beneficially affect or negatively impact upon individual sense of place, the concept properly refers to an individual’s connection with the place (location, building, landscape, city, and so on) and to their experience of place. ‘Spirit of place’, or genius loci, is a more appropriate term when referring to the qualities of a place that make it special. Some publications define sense of place along the lines of the meanings people assign to a landscape, but such definitions are really no different to the definition of ‘place’ itself. Partly for this reason, American geographer Yi-Fu Tuan prefers the term ‘topophilia’, the love of place.12

The Australian Government’s State of the Environment Report defines sense of place as being ‘an intensely personal response to the environment, social and natural, which the individual experiences in daily life, and at a broader level it can be the individual’s perception of the whole region, state or nation’.13 Edward Relph (Chapter 30) defines it in much the same way: ‘Sense of place is a synaesthetistic faculty that combines sight, hearing, smell, movement, touch, imagination, purpose and anticipation. It is both an individual and an intersubjective attribute, closely connected to community as well as to personal memory and self’.

Place and sense of place are nested concepts, which means they operate at multiple levels and scales. A person can have a place attachment to many different places, for example, to where they live, to where they work, to where they play and recreate, to where they go on holidays, to where they grew up, to some favourite place. People can also have an attachment to place at different scales — to a very specific spot, to a larger location surrounding that spot, to the region beyond that location, to a state as a whole, and even to the nation.

Sense of place has been researched to a considerable extent, defined and dissected in many ways, and measured to various degrees, especially in the discipline of environmental psychology and its application to resource management and planning. In this applied field it is understood that ‘sense of place’ has various components, although a range of schema for understanding those components exists.14 My review of this literature has resulted in the listing below — with sense of place comprising all of the following ingredients. For me ‘place’ and ‘sense of place’ are meant to be holistic, integrating concepts, not narrowly defined singular concepts. Nevertheless, part of the definitional problem comes from the fact that they are macro concepts and therefore in need of unpacking. There are many terms used in the literature, and these often lack consistent definitions, and some writers have not been aware of the full literature on the components of sense of place, all of which cause a degree of confusion.15
Place attachment (or place connectedness or connection to place or place bonding) is the closest component part to 'sense of place' in toto. It has often been said that 'place attachment' is the environmental psychologist's term for the geographer's concept of 'sense of place'. Much of the definitional confusion would be resolved if 'place attachment' was used instead of 'sense of place', and in research fields like environmental psychology and social impact assessment, place attachment has been the primary concept. Place attachment refers specifically to the extent to which an individual has positive feelings about their local environment and/or community. In effect, it is the same as Tuan's topophilia. For me, place attachment is much the same as place identity, which perhaps refers more specifically to the extent to which a person's identity is vested in the local place. Further, I consider place dependence to be more-or-less similar, although strictly speaking it might be seen as the self-perceived strength of association between an individual and a specific place. In Chapter 25, Colin Goodrich and Kaylene Sampson discuss the strong place identity of people who live on the West Coast of the South Island of New Zealand.

Place familiarity and place awareness are similar concepts which relate to the extent of knowledge an individual has about a specific place or local environment. One way of measuring place attachment is to consider the extent to which they have place familiarity. Place familiarity is conceptually different to place attachment, but given that place attachment can be difficult to measure, place familiarity provides a proxy measure. One way of determining place familiarity is the level of toponymic (naming) awareness of an individual or a group. For example, in Chapter 12, Stephen Long demonstrates that the Dajarra people have names for many places along the Georgina River in western Queensland. In Chapter 28, Gordon Wait and Robert Figueroa highlight the extent of stories the Anangu people have about every feature and crevice of Uluru.

Place commitment refers to the extent to which individuals are willing to contribute to their local place. It is generally argued that people with strong place attachment are more likely to have place commitment. Some analyses suggest that this is more likely when place satisfaction is low. In Chapter 26, Anna Spinaze discusses how place commitment could affect the career choices people make. She argues that awareness of this dimension of people's lives could be useful in recruiting and retaining rural healthcare professionals.

People who have a strong sense of place frequently have high levels of belongingness or rootedness or community connectedness — all terms meaning that they have ties to the local place (community) and feel that they belong there. Such concepts are more or less similar to sense of community and social capital (especially bonding ties). What is interesting to note is that while 'place' and 'community' are separate and somewhat unrelated concepts, sense of place inevitably involves community in the understanding of place. Belongingness (or rootedness) refers to community as place, rather than to a biophysical notion of place. Thus, issues like
the level of community cohesion (the inverse of which is the fear of crime, or concerns about security) are related to sense of place. Community cohesion does not refer to the homogeneity of a community, but rather the level of tolerance and goodwill. While there is a blurring between community and biophysical place in these discussions, some research suggests that attachment to community is different to attachment to the natural environment.19

One problem for research into sense of place is that it can be both visceral (embodied) and cognitive (intellectual). People who move from location to location frequently learn how to develop connections with their new place. Because they intellectualise the process, they can profess a stronger sense of place than someone who is rooted in a place for whom the experience of place is more visceral. People can also create an imagined attachment to places they have not been to but to which they have some connection. In Chapter 3, for example, Ursula de Jong discusses her connection to her mother's home country of Switzerland. As a first-generation Australian of Dutch descent, I too had (and continue to have) strong imagined connections to the country of my parents.

Sense of place is also about the senses. Even though I have not lived within 1000 kilometres of where I grew up (in Mackay, North Queensland) for the past 25 years, and even though I only go to North Queensland every five years or so, each time I do I am immediately aware of the feel and smell of the place. My body reacts like it is a homecoming even though I have no social ties there.

Sense of place is embedded in people’s memories and sometimes is revealed as an experience of sentimental longing for the past. However, sense of place is not meant to be a nostalgic, melancholic experience, rather it is the contemporary everyday connection individuals have with their local spaces that gives their life meaning in the present. Having a sense of place contributes to a person’s wellbeing, general health and life satisfaction. Place is fundamental to humanity, for ‘to be human is to live in a world that is filled with significant places: to be human is to have and to know your place’.20

Making sense of it all

Place and sense of place are broad, overarching, multi-faceted concepts that are inherently phenomenological in nature. This means that they are about the personal connections individual people have with where they live, work and play. While dimensions of the sense of place can be measured, it is a holistic concept that is inherently personal. Nevertheless, it is possible to understand something of the features of place that are appreciated by people (whether residents or visitors), and the planning and management of specific locations should take place into consideration.

Because place is a multifaceted concept, no academic discipline has a monopoly on the concept, and ‘place’ therefore is part of many discourses including: human geography,
environmental sociology, rural sociology, social impact assessment, environmental psychology, environmental health, environmental economics, landscape management, architecture, anthropology, philosophy, forestry science, natural resource management, urban and regional planning, environmental history, and cultural studies — just to name a few! Because place is fundamental to humanity, it is also a major topic of interest for the arts and there are many artists who utilise an explicit place-based dimension in their artistic practice.

The chapters in this book have been selected from the many presentations given at the Senses of Place conference held in Hobart in April 2006. They have been chosen specifically to provide a broad base by which to understand the concepts of place and sense of place. The essays are augmented by a DVD which contains grabs from people interviewed at the conference talking about what place means to them. Together they provide a thorough appreciation of place. The book could have been organised in many different ways. We have chosen to present it in four parts. The first part provides several personal accounts (narratives) about specific places and/or specific people’s sense of place. The second part looks at Indigenous understandings of place in both Canada and Australia. The third part is about how place and sense of place are made, and the final part contains chapters that critique and extend the concept and its application.
Notes


11 L Young et al., 'The politics of place: Understanding meaning, common ground, and political difference on the Rocky Mountain Front', *Forest Science*, vol. 49, no. 6, 2003, pp. 855–65.


15 For a longer discussion, see M Patterson & D Williams, 'Maintaining research traditions on place', *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2005, pp. 361–80. See also R Stedman, 'Is it really just a social construction? The contribution of physical environment to sense of place', *Society & Natural Resources*, vol. 16, no. 8, 2003, pp. 671–85.


