Introduction

Place attachment is the symbolic relationship formed by people giving culturally shared emotional/affective meanings to a particular space or piece of land that provides the basis for the individual’s and group’s understanding of and relations to the environment. It is argued that while there are often strong individualistic feelings that may be unique to specific people, there feelings are embedded in a cultural milieu. Thus, place attachment is more than an individual emotional and cognitive experience, and includes cultural beliefs and practices, power relationships, and symbolic identifications that link people to place.

The spatial dimension in cultural anthropology has been assumed implicitly to be a "situatedness" of behavior, a context for action, a background for narrative, and the circumstances of the fieldwork (Appadurai 1988, Lawrence and Low 1990, Enríkin 1991). Recent critiques, however, have challenged this static and passive conception, arguing instead that space is never neutral or given, but constructed by different actors and interests; contested in class, race and gender struggles; and claimed by symbolic appropriation and local control (Rodman 1991, Lawrence and Low 1990, Harvey 1985, Davis 1986, Castells 1983, King 1989). Understandings of space cannot be separated from how people live their lives nor from the historical moment and sociopolitical institutions that structure those lives.

Within this examination of the subjective and objective realities of place and the reunification of space, context and experience emerges questions concerning attachment to place. In attempting to understand place attachment, the affective and symbolic dimensions of place are brought into sharp contrast with spatial dimensions of location and locale.

Ethnographies are filled with descriptions of place attachment and of the embeddedness of people and place, yet there has been little discussion of the concept. In the same sense that place has not been considered a critical concept, place attachment has not been examined in terms of its importance for providing insight into the dynamic processes by which people construct and give meaning to the built environment (Altman and Low 1992, Lawrence and Low 1990). Place attachment implies that for most people there is a transformation of the experience of a space or piece of land into a culturally meaningful and shared symbol, that is, place. But for many places the relationship of space or land and the group is not necessarily through the transformation of experience. Place attachment can apply to mythical places that a person never experiences, or can apply to land ownership and citizenship that symbolically encode sociopolitical as well as experiential meanings. The most important aspect is that there is a symbolic relationship between the individual/group and the place, that may in fact evoke a culturally valued experience, but may just as well derive meaning from other sociopolitical, historical and cultural sources.

This paper explores the concept of place attachment as it is socially constructed, contested and experienced in a Costa Rican plaza. A number of overlapping ways of looking at and interpreting place attachment emerge from the ethnographic study that I have tentatively labelled genealogy, economics, loss, cosmology, pilgrimage and narrative. I consider these emergent processes as a way to begin a
discrimination of the cultural aspects of place attachment.

The Ethnographic Emergence of Place Attachment

In order to explore the concept of place attachment I would like to begin with some fragments from an ongoing ethnography of plazas in San Jose, Costa Rica. The descriptions are based on a series of three fieldwork visits to San Jose, Costa Rica from 1972 to 1974, summers of 1976 and 1979, and two intensive fieldwork periods focusing only on the plaza in 1986 and 1987. The methods used include participant observation supplemented with behavioral observation of plaza activities, behavioral mapping, sample population counts, photographic recording, interviews with occupants and non-occupants in the surrounding neighborhood, library research on the history of the plaza, interviews with historians and other academics specializing on the history of San José, and finally interviews with the governmental agencies and private owners of many of the buildings both on and nearby the plaza. Fieldnotes, transcripts, documents and maps are in the process of being qualitatively analysed. The descriptions present examples of both a centered and decentered account of the cultural life and social behavior on the original plaza mayor of San Jose’ known as parque central. Moving from my surprise and emotional responses to peoples’ own commentaries, and to the commentaries of historians and political observers, a sense of place and of place attachment developed as a theme of the fieldwork.

Genealogy

When I first arrived at the plaza I spent a considerable amount of time observing where everyone sat, stood or waited and soon learned that a group of three elderly men, one with a cane, and one elderly woman occupied the same bench on the southwestern diagonal walk near the entrance. They were there everyday, from 9:30 or 10:00 in the morning until 4:00 in the afternoon, when they were replaced by a young couple or group of friends waiting for the evening bus. As I began to know more about the plaza and plazas in other towns, I learned that other benches had a similar pattern with regular occupants so much so that in Heredia, a small city a few miles away, the benches are known by the names of their occupants. If an occupant was ever missing, inquiries would be made about the health of the person, and there would be widespread speculation about why the occupant did not appear.

On a later occasion when I mistakenly attempted to sit in the place of a late arrival I also learned that the relationship of the occupants to their benches were often inviolate. I was told by a resident of another bench that I was sitting in Rodrigo’s spot, and that he would be displeased to find me there when he arrived. Two other such cases were observed: a newcomer sat in a "claimed place" and was asked to leave by a neighboring occupant, and a woman resting was told by the occupant when he arrived that she could stay a bit, and that he would wait to sit down. In other cases the social control was more subtle with gossip being used to gain back a person’s valued place. These cases are particularly surprising considering that most Costa Ricans will go to great lengths to avoid any kind of conflict or face to face confrontation in normal social interaction. I worked in this plaza for over five months at the conclusion of which I could identify and predict where people would sit at specific times of day and had developed a sense of place identity both for myself and for most occupants.

Returning six months later during dry season, however, I found that the group of four elderly pensioners were now sitting on the inner circle away from the plaza perimeter. I was concerned that I had made a mistake about the importance of place attachment over time and its predictability. I went over and asked the occupants what had happened and whether I had been mistakened about how attached they had been to their earlier place. The seniors reassured me that I was not totally incorrect, that they had sat on the previous bench for over five years, but because of their failing health and the increase of diesel fumes from the surrounding buses they had decided to move. The new bench in the inner circle was selected because it was sheltered from the noise and fumes of the buses that run on the perimeter of the plaza.
Economics

Parque central and the areas within it are not owned by any private individual or agency, but are regulated by the municipal government. Nonetheless, the plaza acts as a workplace controlled by a variety of work groups including the shoeshinemen in the northeast corner, the ambulatory food sellers who set up food stands after 5:00 in the afternoon along the northern perimeter, the lottery ticket sellers with stands on both the northeastern and northwestern corners, the clandestine watch and jewelry sellers scattered throughout, and the construction laborers who wait for pick-up work along the western border. There are also individual entrepreneurs who use the plaza as an office, such as the young man who was selling insurance contracts from a bench. He told me that the bench had become his office since the rents had become so high that he could not afford to maintain one in a nearby building. Most of these work activities have a history on the plaza. There are accounts in novels and in social science reports of the "territories" of the shoeshinemen, the laborers, prostitutes and sellers of stolen goods. The current ambulatory food sellers are recently immigrated Nicaraguans, but they are only replacing other food vendors who worked in these places before. There is a kind of economic place attachment in process here, quite strong for a group like the shoeshinemen, and less so for the young man who has just set up an office on a bench, and this place attachment develops out of a need to have a place to exchange goods and services.

The plaza is a public workplace, and those who work there are firmly attached in term of time and space. The shoeshinemen and salesmen articulate this attachment by saying that this is their place, that they have worked there their entire lives, and that in many cases their brothers, cousins, and sometimes childdren will take over their place in the plaza. People working in the plaza make active claims to space, control their working environment, and defend their spatial rights when contested by other workers, tourists or passers-by.

Loss

One of my first experiences in parque central was observing an old man cry when he saw that two giant palm trees had been cut down. He wept and cried out that now the plaza would never be the same for him as he had spend his entire life under those palm trees—they were like friends and made his bench a special place. Other plaza occupants were also visibly moved by the destruction of the trees; some expressed their grief with tears, while others reminisced about their personal experiences under those trees.

Other older Josefinos who do not use the parque central on a daily basis also talk about the destruction of the elegance of the original plaza, the tearing down of the Victorian bandstand and its replacement with the current concrete structure, and the increase of prostitutes, drug dealers, and other petty criminals, as a loss of place. They tell wonderful stories of how they met their friends and future spouses as they strolled around the inner circle of the plaza after Sunday mass accompanied by the military band in a traditional paseo. The sense of loss in these stories is not with the place itself, but with the decoration and social participants, yet the stories communicate a sense of place attachment that has been disrupted physically, but not in memory, by ongoing social change.

Cosmology

The Spanish settlers who placed the 1789 Cathedral on the eastern perimeter of the original plaza were following a mandated tradition established by the Laws of the Indies in 1571. These ordinances directed the Spanish who settled lands in the New World to organize new cities around a plaza with the city hall, police barracks or station, a Catholic church and the houses of the mayor or caciques facing this civic center. The Cathedral thus became both the physical and spiritual center of urban life, and the plaza became a forecourt or front garden for religious and social activities. The paseo or retreta of young people on Sundays is tied to the religious role of the Church in that the military band plays at the conclusion of the mass. The citizens of San Jose' then pour down the
Cathedral steps into the plaza for the traditional promenade. The relationship of the plaza and the Cathedral are further interwoven in that the plaza and the front steps of the Cathedral are the site of all religious and civic processions and festivals.

Josefinos when asked about the meaning of the Cathedral say that it represents Catholicism, the national religion of Costa Rica. Its relationship to the plaza further represents the close articulation of Costa Rican civic and religious life. In terms of place attachment to the plaza the Cathedral adds a religious dimension to that attachment, so much so that contemporary Protestant and evangelical religious groups also try to establish themselves on the edges of this quasi-sacred space. The Cathedral is the religious center of San José for Catholics, and the plaza is an extension of this cosmological space, thus, the hari krishna, healers, and other religious sects all try to establish their presence. And for some people, attachment to the plaza is based on its cosmological and spiritual importance.

Pilgrimage

The tradition of the paseo to parque central on Sundays and holidays plays an important role in the attachment of Josefinos to their plaza mayor. Families dress up and come from the suburbs to hear the military band on Sundays; elderly pensioners who spend the week with their male companions, bring their wives, children and grandchildren. It is a ritual event that for many is the essence of Sunday, a day of rest and religion, marked by special behavior, activities and dress.

Parque central also is the center of Christmas and Easter festivities. During the two weeks before Christmas the kiosk is decorated with lights and wooden stalls line the walkways selling fruit, candies and Christmas gifts to the crowd that comes each night to shop. The major avenue that borders the north side of the plaza is closed to automobiles for the evening celebrations, and young men and women walk in twos and threes throwing confetti at one another in a variation of the Sunday retreta. These celebrations, the weekly band music and family paseo and the holiday festivities forge a strong link between the Josefinos and their central plaza. The parque central in this context becomes a place that symbolically represents the city and a person’s identification as an urban citizen. Even those Josefinos who normally do not sit in the parque central on a daily or weekly schedule come at holiday time to renew their identification as urban residents through this yearly pilgrimage.

Narrative

In parque central, the large, cement bandstand has generated considerable narrative and figurative language. An example is the dicho (saying) about the cement kiosk when it was first built in 1949 and had a nightclub in its base. The saying goes el kiosko lo construyo Masagosa, debajo el kiosko es donde mas se goza (the kiosk that Masagosa built is where the pleasure is, or where they are most satisfied in the sexual sense of the word). The saying refers to the fact that the kiosk was built by a wealthy Nicaraguan businessman who was a friend of the dictator Somoza and the ambivalence that Costa Ricans feel about their northern neighbor because of current United States involvement in Costa Rica and Central American politics. According to politically conservative Costa Ricans, Nicaragua represents a model of immorality and the tearing down of the Victorian kiosk that was there before represented a defilement of Costa Rican and European-linked culture. However, other Costa Ricans derive pleasure from and exploit the new economic and political relations that the kiosk represents. Ultimately, the nightclub was replaced by a children’s library that some people feel is a more appropriate civic symbol.

The saying, in figurative and metaphoric language, is a strategy for expressing and acting upon conflict about public values expressed in place. Conflicting claims to the use of the kiosk attest to the degree of attachment citizens feel about the elements of the parque central and their metonymic misrepresentations (Fernandez 1988). The repetition of the saying and its commentary provides the plaza with contested moral as well as social meanings.
These ethnographic fragments suggest that there are many ways of experiencing and interpreting place attachment (Low and Altman 1992). There are social aspects experienced as personal relationships occurring in a particular place; temporal aspects formed over time; material aspects experienced through loss or destruction, daily use of, and/or ownership of a place; and ideological aspects experienced through cosmological correspondence, pilgrimage, celebration and/or figurative language and narrative.

Another way of looking at place attachment is to consider how place attachment is socially constructed through genealogy, economics, loss or destruction, cosmology, pilgrimage, and narrative as well as other aspects of sociocultural life. "Social construction" is used here to suggest that place attachment develops through beliefs and practices of people in a place; thus, place attachment is generated through passions, actions, stories, myths and exchange.

Conclusion

It is difficult to conclude with any precise definition or summary of place attachment in cultural anthropology. This exploration of the concept suggests that place attachment is experienced by individuals and groups as depicted in many ethnographies. Certainly place attachment plays a role in generating the meaning of place. I have suggested that there are a number of ways that place attachment is socially constructed through the beliefs and practices. Place attachment is created through a genealogical relationship with a place, through economic exchange or working in a place, through the loss or destruction of a valued place, through cosmological correspondence of or pilgrimage to a place, and even through narratives, poems, songs and naming of a place. Place attachment provides an opportunity to study the intersection of subjective and objectives realities of place and to focus on the tension created. Thus, the inclusion of place and place attachment in our discourse opens up new areas of investigation and understanding of the cultural experience.

References