



Planting roots in foreign soil? – Immigrant place meanings in an urban park



Kelly Main*

Department of City and Regional Planning, California Polytechnic State University, 1 Grand Avenue, San Luis Obispo, CA 93407, United States

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the place-based meanings of an urban public space, MacArthur Park, in a Latino and immigrant neighborhood in Los Angeles, California. Both quantitative and qualitative data analysis revealed a broad range of park experiences that were both positive and negative and produced meanings that were individual, social, cultural, and political. The study found that MacArthur Park affirms traditional national, cultural, and ethnic identities for immigrants and supports their construction of a new, translocal and Central American identity in Los Angeles. Although the study found that the park also serves as a restorative, entertaining, and social space for park goers, these positive experiences were accompanied by negative experiences and meanings of the park related to maintenance and crime and conflicts associated with inequality and access, confirming the importance of considering the full range of social, cultural, and political meanings associated with place.

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1. Introduction

Global migration is producing rapid changes in public spaces throughout the U.S., as immigrants remake the streets, parks, and other communal spaces in their neighborhoods (Ehrkamp, 2005; Mirafab, 2011). The use of public spaces by sometimes new, sometimes highly diverse populations creates a number of questions regarding how to work with these communities on the design and management of these spaces (Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995). Without an understanding of the importance of public spaces to the communities who use them, we run the risk of interfering, threatening, and even destroying their significance and the multitude of benefits that accrue for the people who use such spaces (Manzo, 2005; Stodolska, Acevedo, Shinew, & Izenstark, 2011).

In the past 40 years academics from various disciplines have contributed to the study of the various meanings of places to people (Milligan, 1998), particularly place attachment—the emotional bonds that people form with places (Altman & Low, 1992)—and place identity—the role that places play in individual, social, and group identity (Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). While these studies have contributed to specific aspects of the meaning of urban public spaces, very few studies have looked comprehensively at the full range of meanings

associated with place (Manzo, 2005), particularly public spaces in neighborhoods with population changes that involve a diversity of cultures and the rapid and fluid movement of people through the neighborhood (Abramson, Manzo, & Hou, 2006).

The limited number of studies with a comprehensive approach to understanding the relevance of place in human existence has produced calls for more scholarship on a greater range of place types and place meanings (Lewicka, 2011). Manzo (2005) pointed out that studies have concentrated on the importance of the residence, but less is known about the significance of specific neighborhood and communal spaces. And while the positive aspects of emotional bonds to place and place-related identity have been explored, relatively less is known about ambivalent or negative feelings about place, including meanings that are social or political in nature (Manzo, 2005) or related to the contested aspects of place associated with inequality, access and control (DiMasso, Dixon, & Pol, 2011). The purpose of this study was to explore place meanings in a context that has received less attention: 1) a specific type of space—a neighborhood park; 2) among a specific population—a multi-cultural and translocal community; and 3) a full range of meanings—positive, ambivalent, negative, individual, social, cultural, political, and any other themes that might emerge.

1.1. Place and place meanings

While enriching the understanding of the importance of places to people, the large body of literature on place has resulted in some

* Tel.: +1 (805) 756 2285; fax: +1 (805) 756 1340.
E-mail address: kdmain@calpoly.edu.

confusion and debate regarding place-related concepts both between and within disciplines (Farnum, Hall, & Kruger, 2005; Kruger, Hall, & Stiefel, 2008), including the concepts of place and place meaning. Place has been defined as “space that has been given meaning through personal, group, or cultural processes” (Altman & Low, 1992, p. 5; Milligan, 1998). This definition of place suggests that meaning is not inherent in the physical or social aspects of place. Increasingly, there is an acknowledgment that place meanings are “not only constructed by the individuals, they are also conveyed by the social and cultural group with which people are most intimately connected” (Kyle & Johnson, 2008: 111; Milligan, 1998; Manzo, 2005; Stedman, 2008). This research uses the conception of place meaning proposed by Kyle and Johnson (2008)—“the thoughts, feelings and emotions that individuals and collectives express toward a place” (p. 111). Place meanings can be found in people’s descriptions of places and their responses and lived experiences in place, all of which capture the importance and uniqueness of a specific locale (Stewart, 2008, p. 83).

Although there are relatively few examples of comprehensive studies of place meanings for specific types of places (Gustafson, 2001a; Manzo, 2005), broader conceptualizations of place meaning have been studied for types of places that share characteristics with MacArthur Park—ethnic neighborhoods (Mazumdar, Mazumdar, Docuyan, & McLaughlin, 2000), large urban natural areas (Spartz & Shaw, 2011), and contested public space (DiMasso et al., 2011). Furthermore, there has been progress in terms of understanding various types of relationships that people have with specific places (Lewicka, 2011; Manzo, 2005), including emotional bonds with place (place attachment) (Altman & Low, 1992; Cooper Marcus, 1992; Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001; Low, 2000; Mazumdar et al., 2000; Milligan, 1998; Ryan, 2005; Scannell & Gifford, 2010; Wynveen, Kyle, & Sutton, 2012) and the role place plays in the formation of self- and group-identity (place identity) (Droseltis & Vignoles, 2010; Proshansky et al., 1983; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996; Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Golledge, & Scabini, 2006).

1.2. Ethnic neighborhoods and identity

Research looking at the relationship between place and identity in traditional ethnic enclaves, spaces with relatively longstanding and homogeneous cultural norms and identities, has shed light on the role that place plays in the maintenance and reconstruction of identity and subsequent consequences for the emotional bonds formed. First conceptualized by Proshansky et al. (1983), Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) defined four essential principles in the relationship between place and self-identity—distinctiveness, continuity, self-esteem and self-efficacy—defining continuity via characteristics of place that are generic and transferable from one place to another (place-congruent continuity) and characteristics that are specific to places that have emotional significance for a person (place-referent continuity) (p. 208). Recently, Vignoles et al. (2006) expanded the principles to include meaning and social belonging and to explore the construction of relational and collective identities. Early studies of specific enclaves such as Chinatowns (Yuan, 1963), Germantowns, and Little Havanas (Abrahamson, 1996) have contributed to the understanding that enclaves are places where immigrants can achieve continuity of identity through continuity with past places of importance (Mazumdar et al., 2000). As a result, ethnic enclaves remain “an important aspect of an immigrant’s place identity enabling him/her to simultaneously remain connected to the places left behind and yet appropriating and forging significant new place ties” (Mazumdar et al., 2000, p. 320). As a result immigrants form significant bonds to traditional ethnic enclaves (Fried, 1963; Gans, 1962; Mazumdar et al., 2000).

The relationship between continuity of identity and immigrant adaptation has also been demonstrated in studies on ethnic identity and acculturation (Berry, 2005; Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Fuller-Rowell, Ong, & Phinney, 2012; Phinney, 1990, 2003). Phinney (1990, 2003) argued that there are two independent dimensions underlying an immigrant’s cultural identity: an identity with respect to a culture of origin and an identity related to one’s society of settlement. Similarly, Berry (2005) identifies two basic issues/preferences immigrants engaged in acculturation must address: 1) maintenance of one’s heritage culture and identity; 2) contact with and participation in a larger society and with other ethnocultural groups that may be encountered. Empirical studies have demonstrated that negotiation of these somewhat bipolar aspects of identity and acculturation impact adaptation: both one’s psychological adaptation (well-being and good mental health) and one’s sociocultural adaptation (social competence in managing daily life in an intercultural setting). Studies have produced relatively consistent results, finding positive adaptation consequences for immigrants who pursue and accomplish integration (retention of valued features of one’s heritage culture and selective adoption of new behaviors from the larger society), as well as those with a strong orientation toward their own ethnocultural group (Berry et al., 2006). And while results vary for Latinos, some empirical studies have found that discrimination on the part of the larger society is identified with higher levels of ethnic identity among some stigmatized groups (Fuller-Rowell et al., 2012, p. 2).

The global movement of labor and improvements in communications and financial technology have led to valid criticisms of descriptions of ethnic neighborhoods as enclaves—culturally homogeneous with constructions of identity related to simplistic notions of ethnicity (Ehrkamp, 2005)—even proposing that identities have become de-territorialized (Appadurai, 1996). For instance, in a study of a Seattle community, Abramson et al. (2006) found ethnic and cultural diversity, multiple centers, undefined boundaries, and translocal relationships that sometimes produced conflicts over space. Technology related to international banking and communication permits people to maintain economic and social ties with their sending communities not possible until recently (Vertovec, 2001). Because studies of attachments and meaning in immigrant communities have been almost entirely focused on ethnic neighborhoods with relatively homogeneous national identities—for instance, New York’s Chinatown (Yuan, 1963), Boston’s Italian community (Gans, 1962), the Vietnamese community in Little Saigon (Mazumdar et al., 2000), and others (Abrahamson, 1996)—and because most of these studies predate technological developments that allow frequent social and economic contact with sending communities, little is known about attachment and identity and other place-related meanings in immigrant neighborhoods with nationally, culturally, or ethnically diverse populations with both transnational and translocal practices.

Up until relatively recently, belonging and emotional ties to local places have been negatively related to the movement associated with transnational communities (Gustafson, 2001b), as has cultural diversity (Lewicka, 2011). The negative association between mobility and belonging is partly explained by the early focus on place meanings associated with “rootedness,” the subconscious ties to place derived from daily experience in and association of meaningful experiences with places (Tuan, 1974), and the psychological importance of the childhood residence and other childhood places as a locus for self-development and identity (Cooper Marcus, 1992). Long-term residence is still the most consistent predictor of place attachment, (Lewicka, 2011). Studies have demonstrated, however, that attachments to previous places may carry over to new places (Feldman, 1990; Hummon, 1990, 1992) and that this

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