



Revisiting the appropriation of space in metropolitan river corridors



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ABSTRACT

This article reintroduces the concept of 'appropriation of space' into current theoretical debates and empirical approaches in environmental psychology. We present an analysis of a case study conducted in a Barcelona metropolitan river corridor, aimed at exploring how the development of people-place bonds can foster pro-environmental behaviours in a natural open space.

The multi-method qualitative analysis based on participant observation, documentary research and interviews with 57 inhabitants reveals a long-term process of appropriation of the riverside environment that typically results in a sense of responsibility of the subject towards it. The article specifically shows that the time factor is crucial in the explanation of the process of appropriation, and that future longitudinal studies in this and other cases will be required to assess more accurately its importance. Finally, we stress the benefits of taking proper advantage of citizens' cumulative awareness of the management of river corridors.

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1. Introduction

Peri-urban open spaces are perceived as an essential component of quality of life in densely-populated areas (Harnik, 2000). These places allow people to pursue activities in contact with nature, with beneficial effects on their health and psychological wellbeing that have started to be explored in recent decades (Gifford, 2007; Kaplan, Kaplan, & Ryan, 1998). Furthermore, people establish emotional bonds with these places which become a powerful force in their preservation and improvement (Ryan, 2000, 2005). Specifically, the appreciation of and commitment to natural peri-urban spaces can encourage responsible environmental behaviour patterns (Grob, 1995; Hines, Hungerford, & Tomera, 1987; Jiménez, 1997; Scannell & Gifford, 2010b), catalyse a significant level of voluntary work and generate private financial resources for their maintenance (Platt, 2006), ultimately making an important contribution to their sustainability.

From this perspective, metropolitan rivers deserve special consideration due to their growing social use after decades of intensive degradation and neglect, something that is closely

associated with urban pressure and the risk of flooding. Contact with nature, engaging in sport, celebrating events, daily strolls and cultivating the soil for recreational purposes all explain, to a large extent, the daily use of river areas that has become progressively consolidated from the 1980s in developed countries around the world (Novotny, Ahern, & Brown, 2010; Warner, Van Buuren, & Edelenbos, 2013). Actually, river corridors have become significant collective places and they play a crucial role in the legibility of urban regions (Lynch, 1960, 1984). In this sense, the new culture of water and landscape, specified in the European Water Framework Directive (European Council, 2000a) and the European Landscape Convention (European Council, 2000b), confirms the importance of these watercourses for the wellbeing of metropolitan communities, and underlines the need for collective involvement in the sustainable management of the water cycle and the riverside landscape (Mc Harg, 1969). In accordance with the evident importance of this approach within a European context, over the last few years public administrations have carried out significant work with a view to the physical and social recovery of river corridors (e.g. Benages-Albert & Vall-Casas, 2014), but there is still a long way to go to achieve generalized responsible pro-environmental behaviour.

Within the academic domain, environmental-psychological research has provided powerful conceptual tools to account for how people establish bonds with their life-spaces, and how such

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people-place bonds may be beneficial to foster pro-environmental commitments and protection-oriented behaviours. Among these concepts, appropriation of space (Graumann, 1976; Korosec-Serfaty, 1976; Pol, 1996; Vidal & Pol, 2005¹) is particularly suited to broach the psychological investments towards places. On the one hand, it specifically highlights the temporal dimension in the construction of people-place bonds, articulating both place identification and emotional aspects as evolving experiences. For instance, it allows framing within the life-cycle the strong sense of “insideness” (Rowles, 1983) that the elderly may feel towards the town they have lived in since they were born. Or it allows the exploration of inter-generational continuity through symbolic relationships with certain home-spaces where things are stored and re-valued over time (see Korosec-Serfaty, 1984, on attics and cellars as time-repositories). On the other hand, it explicitly brings into sharper focus the territorial processes (among them sociospatial conflicts) shaping or undermining experiences of place attachment.

However, despite the analytical specificities and integrative potential of space-appropriation, this concept has progressively been replaced by mostly individualistic and atomistic approaches, to the point where it is currently somewhat overlooked. Other similar concepts, especially place-attachment (Altman & Low, 1992; Giuliani, 2003; Hidalgo, 1998), place identity (Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983), and sense of place (Gustafson, 2001; Hay, 1988), amongst others, have experienced better fortune when it comes to explaining the basis of the phenomenon of what it is that links people with spaces. It is likely that linguistic connotations have also had an influence, the term ‘appropriation of space’ being clear in French and other Latin-based languages (Spanish, Italian and Catalan), yet confusing in its English meaning (Pol, 2002). On this point, we think it is worth recovering the term ‘appropriation of space’ (Pol, 1996), given its potential to re-integrate within one same temporal process place-related psychological experiences such as place identity, place attachment or place preference, rather than treating such constructs as neatly separated entities somehow interrelated in a part-whole relationship (e.g. Kyle, Graefe, & Manning, 2005; Pretty, Chipuer, & Bramston, 2003). The concept of appropriation allows the redefinition of such constructs as different experiential moments within one same ongoing process of territorial and symbolic relationship with places.

Consequently, this article is a deliberate attempt to reintroduce appropriation of space into current theoretical debates and empirical approaches aiming to explain how and why people, as time goes by, actively create and sustain affective and territorial bonds to previously unused or less used environments.

1.1. The concept of appropriation of space

The origin of the concept of appropriation of space goes back to the 1960s at the start of what some scholars consider the “second coming” of environmental psychology (Pol, 1988), with Moles, Rohmer, Fischer and Korosec-Serfaty as the main proponents of one of the perspectives that they called the ‘psychology of space’. The main, but not the only, impetus behind the theory of the appropriation of space was due to Korosec-Serfaty, promoter of an international conference held in 1976 that made this concept clear to the scientific community. As far as Korosec-Serfaty was concerned, appropriation of space can be understood as a feeling of possessing and managing a space, irrespective of its legal ownership, for its everyday use or as a means of identification. This conference also

highlighted the views of Graumann (1976), who defined appropriation as a way of interiorizing space, and Proshansky (1976), who directly associated appropriation of space with personal identification, probably as an antecedent to developing his subsequent theories about the identity of space (Proshansky, 1978; Proshansky et al., 1983). During the 1980s, however, the concept of appropriation was seldom drawn on to explain how and why people develop transient or long-standing bonds with their life-environments (with some exceptions, see Korosec-Serfaty, 1984), and was narrowly defined as the “act of exercising control over a particular physical setting” (Brower, 1980, p. 183), that is, it was generally conceptualised as a subcomponent of a broader process of territoriality (see Brown, 1987; Gifford, 1987).

Years later, the theoretical model known as the dual model of appropriation of space (Pol, 1996, 2002; Vidal & Pol, 2005) was proposed as a systematic attempt to theorize how people establish bonds with their life-spaces in a way that integrates both symbolic and material processes shaping the environmental experience. The time variable was underlined in this model as a crucial one, proposing that spatial appropriation unfolds diachronically through the reciprocal feedback between territorial actions and personal/social identifications; both of which are present throughout everybody’s life-cycle but with a different weighting at each stage. According to this model, individual and collective actions transform and attribute meaning to the space, while symbolic identifications with the transformed space reciprocally activate bonds between people and groups (see Fig. 1). Therefore, the duality and interaction of the behavioural (the action of transforming the space) and the symbolic (affective, cognitive and interactive processes) components allows the physical space to be transcended and to connect to other places recreated from the memory and imagination of the subject (Di Masso, Vidal, & Pol, 2008, p. 376).

This dual model of appropriation of space has been tested out in dense urban environments. As an example, in a Barcelona neighbourhood immersed in a profound housing remodelling plan, both identification with the place, as well as inhabitants’ practices, explained people-place bonds (Vidal, 2002).

Considering both original and more recent contributions, it is possible to distill at least four analytical advantages of the concept of space-appropriation compared to similar environmental-psychological concepts (i.e. place attachment, place dependence, etc.). First and most clearly, as we stated earlier, it incorporates the temporal dimension given the attention paid to how people-place bonds evolve across life-cycle stages (Pol, 1996), how time becomes condensed in memories that bind people to places (Korosec-Serfaty, 1984) and how spatial usages transform territorial involvement into place-identification (Vidal & Pol, 2005). Second, it emphasises the dialectic nature of the bonding process (behavioural and symbolism). Third, it makes the territorial and embodied dimensions of place-bonding clearer. And fourth, it encourages a clearer understanding of the potential conflict provoked by different uses and transformations of space (Di Masso, Dixon, & Pol, 2011; see also Hay, 1998, on conflicts with indigenous people having spiritual bonds with places). To be sure, very few studies have attempted an integrative conceptualisation such as this one (see Scannell and Gifford’s (2010a) ‘tripartite model of place attachment’, and Pinheiro (2013) as suggesting exceptions).

The temporal dimension of people-based bonds, although not neglected (see Altman & Low, 1992), has been limited to particular environments and psychological experiences (e.g. the home – Werner, Altman, & Oxley, 1985; environmental attitudes – Milfont & Gouveia, 2006; or memory – Chawla, 1992; Rubinstein & Parlamelee, 1992; Lewicka, 2008). Under the model of space appropriation, time-factors shaping people-place relations can be more detailed, covering life-cycle stages, inter-generational bonds,

¹ The concept of the appropriation of space has been extensively used, outside psychology, by urban sociologists and political geographers drawing on the Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre (Lefebvre, 1974; Mitchell, 1995).

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