



On the contested nature of place: 'Figuera's Well', 'The Hole of Shame' and the ideological struggle over public space in Barcelona

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 13 May 2011

Keywords:

Public space
Place meanings
Contestation
Rhetoric
Ideology
Barcelona

ABSTRACT

This paper explores some of the discursive practices through which the place meanings are formulated, warranted and, above all, contested. Drawing particularly on the work of the social psychologist Michael Billig, we present a rhetorical analysis of newspaper reports and interview accounts about the 'development' of a contested public space in Barcelona, known locally both as Figuera's Well and the Hole of Shame. This analysis explores a number of rhetorically opposed constructions of the nature, purpose and appropriate beneficiaries of this place, whose implications are discussed both within the context of local power struggles and within the context of wider ideological struggles over the nature of public spaces in Barcelona. We argue that a rhetorical perspective reveals how practices of attributing meaning and value to places are often more conflict-ridden, action-oriented, and politically-charged than is implied by much research in environmental psychology. Relatedly, we argue that environmental psychologists need to complement a 'weak' conception of the role of conflict in the formation of public space (focused on subjective differences in environmental tastes, preferences and values) with a 'strong' conception of the role of conflict (focused on ideological struggles over access, equality and inclusion).

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1. Introduction

To the east of Barcelona's historic centre lies a narrow strip of public land (see Fig. 1) that falls within the city's Casc Antic district. In its recent history, this land has been named in two quite different ways, a tension that expresses an ongoing controversy. For some it is known as 'Figuera's Well', a title borrowed from an adjacent street and used to designate a space selected for a government-approved programme of semi-private 'regeneration'. For others it is known as the 'Hole of Shame', a title used mainly by those seeking not only to highlight the illegitimacy of this regeneration program, but also to indict a longer history of government neglect of the local environment. As will become apparent during the course of this paper, the name one applies to this space is not arbitrary. In everyday discourse in Barcelona's Casc Antic, using the wrong name to the wrong audience may prompt a surprisingly heated round of challenges, corrections and repairs. The very act of naming, it seems, betrays one's political orientation towards the site's nature, meaning and future development. Whether advertently or inadvertently, it

implies a position within a wider struggle to define and control public space.

Using this struggle as a case study, we have three objectives in the present paper. First, we argue that environmental psychological research might benefit from a greater recognition of the role of processes of social conflict and contestation in shaping place meanings. Second and related, we argue that concepts and methodological tools drawn from rhetorical social psychology may facilitate work on contested meanings of place. Thus, extending the recent 'discursive turn' in environmental psychology (e.g. Aiello & Bonaiuto, 2003; Dixon & Durrheim, 2000), we conduct a rhetorical analysis of discourse about Figuera's Well/The Hole of Shame, building particularly on the work of Michael Billig (Billig, 1987, 1991). Finally, on a more general level, we show how our case study provides insights into the geopolitical forces that are currently reshaping the urban fabric of Barcelona, forces that refract wider struggles over public spaces in cities elsewhere in the world.

2. Beyond placid geographies: conflict, place and environmental psychology

In 1979 the International Architectural Psychology Conference gathered together professionals working in a number of disciplines

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Fig. 1. (a) Barcelona in Spain (white square); (b) Santa Caterina neighbourhood within Ciutat Vella's district (area delimited by white lines).

to discuss a core topic: *conflicting experiences of space*. Among other themes, the conference was designed to explore tensions between lay and professional definitions of space use; disputes between different social groups about the proper uses of spaces; disparities between planned and actual spatial usages; and conflicting interpretations of the meaning of public and private spaces. The meeting's goals were practical and ethical as well as academic; that is, in generating knowledge about the nature and causes of spatial conflict, contributors sought to devise concrete strategies for fostering peaceful coexistence in everyday spaces. At the same time, contributors also presupposed that "conflicts and tensions between groups are just part of life" (Woitrin, 1979, p.20), and thus constitute a fundamental concern for researchers interested in the relationship between people and their environments.

This meeting testifies that, in its formative years, practitioners working within the fledgling discipline of Environmental Psychology recognised the fundamental significance of conflict for understanding human–environmental relations. In subsequent decades, however, surprisingly few environmental psychologists have developed this early interest in a systematic or concerted way. To be sure, work on territoriality has shown that spatial competition can sometimes precipitate aggression, displacement, and even violence (e.g. Gifford, 1987; Bell, Fischer, Baum, & Greene, 1996). Territorial markers may prevent conflict by communicating ownership, control and defence as a 'warning system' (Becker, 1973); however, they may also turn territories into 'sociofugal' spaces (Osmond, 1957) and, when spatial entitlements are not well-established or agreed upon (Bell et al., 1996), instigate interpersonal or intergroup aggression. On a more general level, some environmental psychologists have highlighted how individuals or social groups may attribute antithetical meanings to particular places (e.g. Contreras, 2006; Devine-Wright & Lyons, 1997; Hubbard, 1996) and accordingly come to hold discrepant views about the kinds of people or activities such places should accommodate (e.g. Dixon & Durrheim, 2004; Dixon, Levine, & McCauley, 2006; Pol, Di Masso, Castrechini, Bonet, & Vidal, 2006). Others have noted how intergroup power relations may shape human environments (e.g. Mazumdar, 2005; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 1997).

In the vast majority of research, however, the social struggles that routinely mark the creation, transformation and lived experience of our environments have tended to be submerged. Thus, in their influential discussion of 'substantial paradigms' in environmental psychology, Saegert and Winkel (1990) observed that

"...efforts to shape and control the environment by different groups also lead to the possibility of intergroup conflict, a neglected issue in much of the work reviewed here" (p.466). Likewise, in the conclusion of his article on conflicts between lay and professional interpretations of architecture, Hubbard (1996) noted that "environmental meanings, and hence preferences, are clearly tied into processes of cultural contestation. It is therefore suggested that the recovery of such meanings, and their contestation between different groups, could, and indeed should, be an important research foci for environmental psychology" (p.91). The present paper is an attempt to capitalise on the recommendations of Saegert and Winkel (1990) and Hubbard (1996) by treating conflict as a central and abiding concern for environmental psychology.

What do we mean by conflict in this context? Clearly, the term may be defined in many different ways with varying realizations within the human geography of everyday life. Our emphasis here is on the territorial manifestations of conflict, as expressed via 'controversial' occupations, disputes about usage, and struggles over who should control a given space and why. In this respect, we have found it heuristically useful to distinguish between *weak* and *strong* definitions of conflict. A weak definition of conflict is built around the recognition that the meanings attributed to spaces and places are often socially diverse and relative to the beliefs, values, motivations and cultural backgrounds of particular users. This diversity and relativity may provoke disagreements about the 'proper' design of particular environments or about the rules that (should) govern our behaviour there, a possibility that several environmental psychologists have discussed (e.g. see Carr, Francis, Rivlin, & Stone, 1992; Rapoport, 1979). Weak conflicts also exist when norms of spatial use and functional meanings are not clearly communicated and thus become subject to incongruent interpretations. Conversely, as Rapoport (1979, p.908) notes, "when space organisation and culture are congruent, i.e. when the schemata expressed in space organisation match images, ideals, and preferences, things work." Ultimately, then, this weak conception roots conflict mainly within variations in individuals' interpretations of culture-bound spatial clues and messages and focuses attention on the social, cognitive, and emotional sources of such variations.

The strong definition of conflict adopted in the present paper, by contrast, treats conflict as a chronic, organic and inevitable product of wider political struggles that are both expressed within, and reproduced through, our human geography. It is perhaps not surprising that researchers working in contexts with a stark and visible history of intergroup hierarchy and inequality have favoured this strong definition, which treats conflict less as a reflection, for instance, of cultural differences in place 'preferences' or aesthetic 'tastes' and more as a symptom of underlying relations of domination, subordination and resistance (e.g. Possick, 2004; Dixon & Durrheim, 2004; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 1997). Such relations, of course, are manifest not only in the concrete organisation of our material environments, but also in ideological struggles to define their meaning and value. Strong spatial conflicts are thus grounded in struggles between groups embedded within relations of inequality and arise out of such relations. From this perspective, both territorial behaviours and collective struggles to transform space – standard topics in environmental psychology – are treated not merely as expressions of individual psychological motives, lack of 'readability' of spatial clues, failed decoding, interpretive disputes or perceptual mismatches, but also as expressions of underlying power relations.

3. Place meanings: from subjective representation to rhetorical and ideological construction

The trend in environmental psychology has been to treat the attribution of place meanings primarily as an individual and

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