

**PLACE ATTACHMENT AND COMMUNITY SENTIMENT  
IN MARGINALISED NEIGHBOURHOODS:  
A EUROPEAN CASE STUDY**

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*Résumé*

La présente analyse explore le sens d'appartenance au lieu et ses relations avec l'emplacement et le « locale » dans le contexte de quartiers urbains. La notion de lieu est conceptualisée en fonction du cadre au sein duquel les relations sociales sont constituées, des effets sur les « locales » des processus social et économique et de la création d'un sens d'attachement au lieu, défini comme les « structures de sentiments » locaux (Williams 1977). Puisant dans des données recueillies auprès de résidents de quartiers marginaux dans six villes européennes, ce texte explique le sens de lieu dans la vie quotidienne de la communauté. Le lieu est souvent interprété comme étant un dépositaire de la mémoire commune et des traditions. Un sens du lieu, enraciné dans le passé, s'affiche comme une ressource permettant la mobilisation autour des défis présents. Le sentiment d'appartenance ressort comme un point de repaire significatif de l'identité et de la communauté, même si un sens du lieu est mis à l'épreuve dans les lieux urbains modernes.

**Mots clés:** Lieu; Appartenance au lieu; Quartiers; Communauté; Exclusion sociale; Résistance.

**Key words:** Place; Place Attachment; Neighbourhood; Community; Social Exclusion; Resistance.

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*Abstract*

This paper explores the meaning of place attachment and its connection to location and locale in the context of the urban neighbourhood. The concept of place is conceptualised in terms of the setting in which social relations are constituted, the effects upon locales of social and economic processes and the creation of a sense of place, defined as the local ‘structure of feeling’ (Williams 1977). Drawing on data gathered from residents in marginalised neighbourhoods across six European cities, the paper explicates the meaning of place in the everyday life of the community. Place is frequently construed through a repository of shared memories and traditions. A sense of place rooted in the past is deployed as a resource to mobilise around the challenges of the present. Feelings of place attachment resonate as a significant marker of identity and community even as sense of place is challenged by the developments in modern city places.

**Introduction**

You love the place and you hate the place... I went up there [on a visit to the North of England] because I wanted to get away from it all, and... when I got back to London I felt like kissing the ground. I was choked! It’s pretty much a love/hate sort of situation, especially when you have lived in the one area all your life.

—Resident of Holloway, London

Some time ago, a British newspaper reported on the death of an elderly gentleman in Hackney, London. Apparently, among the deceased’s belongings were personal maps made of his walks around the neighbourhood. These intimate spatial portraits of the relationship between an individual and his locale reflect the (often underestimated) significance attached to place in everyday life. For this senior citizen, it seems, the project of generating ‘existential significance’ (Relph 1976: 88) was deeply imbued with a sense of place. Here I want to explore the meaning of place attachment, and its connection to location and locale in the context of the urban neighbourhood. My interest in this question has been stimulated through participation in the Culture of Cities project, a key objective of which is to explore the importance of place in the everyday life of the city. According to Alan Blum, “the question of the social construction of senses of place, and of identification with places, becomes available in discourses through which visions of loyalty and of the persistence of the city as a social form appear and take on new shape” (1999: 4). I was struck by this observation when I came to read the biographical narratives collected from urban dwellers in the context

of another research project in which I was also involved. Briefly, BETWIXT is a European project examining social exclusion and precariousness in seven European cities. This project adopted a two-pronged approach to the study of social processes in the city: first, the research mapped each of the participating cities – Dublin, London, Toulouse, Turin, Lisbon, and Umea, Sweden,<sup>1</sup> – in terms of the extent and degree of urban social inequality and spatial segregation. Second, city research teams selected a single neighbourhood within their remit, which exhibited levels of precariousness primarily in terms of relative income levels and unemployment rates. Each of the six case study neighbourhoods was studied through the combined techniques of field research, interviews with key informants, and in-depth interviews with 27 householders. Thus, a considerable amount of data was obtained on the social milieus of family, community and neighbourhood in these deprived urban contexts. Although the focus of the BETWIXT project was primarily on the presence or absence of resources in a material sense, the field work also provided insight into the significance of non-material resources in the struggle to cope. For example, place was frequently construed through a repository of shared memories and traditions. A sense of place rooted in the past was deployed as a resource that could be used to mobilise around the challenges of the present. Such feelings of place attachment resonated as a significant marker of identity and community in changing neighbourhoods. In other words, our respondents showed us that it is impossible to separate how place is experienced in terms of material social practices from how it is imagined. While the BETWIXT study sought to problematise the social milieu of the neighbourhood, particularly in terms of material social practices, what emerged in the biographical narratives gathered from urban dwellers was a sense of ambiguity and indeterminacy in relation to place. This data will be drawn on here to explicate the central concern of this paper, namely, how a sense of place is socially constructed, and how a place-bound identity is elaborated in the context of the neighbourhood and expressed in its symbolic locale.

## **The Concept of Place**

Place is a slippery term which is difficult to define. Embedded within the concept of place are layers of sedimented meaning derived from memory, sentiment, tradition and identification with a spatial location. In many respects, the preoccupation with place is a response to late modernity, a period that has presaged the collapsing of barriers of time and space. As the latter recede in significance, particularly in terms of their role in placing boundaries on the structure and flow of everyday life, social commentators have increasingly raised concerns about the evolution of a concomitant placelessness in contemporary societies.

For Heidegger, dwelling is the essence of being. The capacity to inhabit a particular place affords the dweller the opportunity “to be set at peace,... to remain at peace within the free, the preserve, the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its essence” (1978: 327). Place in the sense of a locus of being is directly threatened by the unfettered forces of modernity, harbingers of flexibility, transience, and impermanence. Similarly, Edward Relph has argued that the potential for people to develop a sense of place “in technologically advanced cultures has been undermined by the possibility of increased spatial mobility and by a weakening of the symbolic qualities of places” (1976: 66). More recently, Richard Sennett contends that as capitalism spreads its tentacles globally into the public space of the city, “attachment and engagement with specific places is dispelled... and the accumulation of shared history, and of collective memory, diminishes...” (2000). This is particularly relevant in the context of the European cities' precarious neighbourhoods, which are frequently characterised as interstitial urban spaces,<sup>2</sup> undergoing processes of industrialisation, de-industrialisation and, in some cases, rehabilitation through urban renewal projects and gentrification. When industrial buildings are destroyed or renewed as upmarket apartment complexes, when streets of row housing become gentrified, when a drugs economy and culture takes hold, the locally rooted neighbourhood milieu loses something of its character, popular memory, and tradition. The place becomes a dis-embedded milieu. Whether the changes are wrought by the influx of immigrants in Aurora (Turin), drug dealers in Kilmainham (Dublin) or gentrifiers in Kilmainham and Holloway (London), they all threaten to dilute shared history and collective memory. As we shall see, local residents are not always powerless in the face of these changes and do articulate discourses of resistance.

A number of key themes emerge from the literature as being crucial in establishing a basis for a sense of place or place attachment. These can be summarised as follows:

(1) *Built and natural environment:*

A crucial part of our human physiological nature produces preferences for environments that satisfy basic needs, such as places that offer protection and comfort (Riley 1992; Simonsen 1997). Environmental backdrops, both natural and constructed, come to be inscribed in our place consciousness. Nature, as Molotch et al. point out, “both influences and takes on different reality depending on how, as a continuous matter, it lashes up with the other aspects of the local milieu” (2000: 794).

(2) *Social networks:*

The existence of associational life in the form of interactions, personal relations and institutional practices at the level of locality are crucial to place

attachment (Simonsen 1997: 172). Furthermore, community voluntary associations are significant not only as integrating mechanisms that cover a range of fields of activity, but because “they harbour ‘memory traces’ through which something like a social structure can transpose itself from one time or institutional realm to the next” (Molotch et al. 2000: 794).

(3) *The culture of place/symbolic locale:*

Embeddedness or rootedness within a particular culture that holds up familiar ideals and standards of ‘good’ places that we respond to, and in which certain landscapes and built forms become cultural symbols, are crucial to developing a sense of place. Harvey Molotch et al. have approached the comparative analysis of localities in Southern California by focusing on the twin notions of character and tradition as ways of accessing the idea of place distinctiveness (2000: 792). Significantly, the concept of a landscape as a cultural artefact can operate at scales from the neighbourhood to entire regional, even national, landscapes (Riley 1992: 17). Our unique, human responses to places and the associations they carry in terms of memories and fantasies are at the root of attachment. Indeed, they are directly related to the process of developing self-identity (Childress 1996: 341). In other words, concrete everyday practices give rise to a cultural mediation or ‘structure of feeling’ (Williams 1977). As a result, one place as opposed to any other may become the object of identity for the subject (Agnew 1993: 263).

Riley counsels us that attachment to landscape is complex, based as it is on a “set of threads woven through one’s life. Childhood’s landscapes, and later attachments to landscapes, are not only sources of satisfaction in themselves but the stuff of an ever-changing interior drama within the human psyche” (1992: 18). Place, then, denotes an environment that is ‘experienced’ (even if only in the imagination), rather than rationally examined or economically valued, an environment seen as a personally relevant whole rather than as a distant set of divisible or abstract components (Childress 1996: 340). In exploring the idea of place attachment it is necessary to focus on the meanings imputed by people to their cultural and physical surroundings, while also taking cognisance of the related concepts of landscape and space, inside and outside, image and representation. As the opening quotation in this paper suggests, there is a tension between place as material reality and place as the locus of sentiment. This creates layers of ambiguity in terms of how people relate to the places in which they live. Furthermore, as Childress has pointed out, the ambiguity of place is also connected to the ambiguity of identity. This is heightened in the modern European city, particularly within precarious neighbourhoods. Crucially, a threat posed to an individual’s sense of place is also perceived as a threat to their self-identity.

## **Place and the Quest for Community**

A second feature of modernity that impinges on our concept of place is the idea that society and economy are no longer organised around local relations. For this reason, Simonsen argues, “it is meaningless in modern urban contexts to talk about communities in the sense of self-sufficient social units” (1997: 171). Nevertheless, this does not mean that local attachments based on familiarity with place and personal social relations cannot exist. In fact, our case studies of relatively deprived neighbourhoods in a number of European cities demonstrate the continuing relevance of place attachment and its perceived importance to quality of life. The biographical narratives gathered in the course of the BETWIXT project bear out Rustin’s argument that much of human experience does not transcend but rather continues to be bound by time and space constraints. “Even though mobility and choice of place has grown, territorial locations remain nodes of association and continuity, bounding cultures and communities” (quoted in Robins 1993: 310). Indeed, the aftermath of the September 11 attacks in New York City laid bare an alternative, a much softer version of that metropolis than the glittering but brittle place identity inscribed in its physical environment. Indeed, Mulgan has employed the term “soft architecture” to describe a city’s “feel and atmosphere, its social networks and its sense of community and citizenship” (quoted in Robins 1993: 310). Viewed from this perspective, the re-enchantment of the urban form (as, for example, through urban regeneration programmes, the aestheticisation of the inner-city, the pulling together of citizens in the wake of disaster) is also about the re-enchantment of identity and community. Numerous commentators have expressed concern that neglecting to foster and support the ‘soft architecture’ of places has deleterious consequences. This argument has been most forcefully (and controversially) articulated by Robert Putnam who focuses on the disappearance of civic togetherness – in terms of everyday community-based practices such as participation in meetings and local organisations, church attendance and voting – in the United States. The impact of this decline in civic togetherness, he concludes, diminishes social capital and undermines community (2001). Putting it more philosophically, Relph suggests that, “an authentic sense of place is above all that of being inside and belonging to your place both as an individual and as a member of a community, and know this without reflecting upon it” (1976: 65).

One of the great difficulties with arguments such as these is that they tend to put a reified version of ‘community’ on a pedestal and pay obsequious homage. As a result, our understanding of what constitutes community has become confused. The term ‘community’ has been used (and misused) in such a wide range of contexts that it is almost impossible to proffer a workable

definition. The term is best approached contextually. It is frequently used to describe both a geographical area and communities of interest. But the word also has other connotations. For example, a number of rather intangible factors which we often think of as 'community spirit' are important in creating positive feelings about neighbourhoods and neighbourhood organisations, in turn feeding into a sense of place and place attachment. According to Hummon, the concepts of place and identity provide us with useful analytical tools in the study of community sentiment (1992: 258-259). In other words, he suggests that we approach the thorny issue of community through explorations of people's sense of place and self-identity. As the forces of globalisation bear down on places and locales, this kind of approach seems useful as a way of understanding the mechanisms underlying place attachment and the creation of symbolic locales. John Agnew defines place as "a discrete if elastic area in which settings for the constitution of social relations are located and with which people can identify" (1992: 263). This definition clearly links the idea of place with both self-identification and identification with a collectivity. Furthermore, Agnew suggests a way of thinking about place that attempts to bridge the gap between structure/agency and objective/subjective frameworks of analysis. He suggests that we focus on *locale*, the setting in which social relations are constituted; *location*, the effects upon locales of social and economic processes operating on a wider scales; and *a sense of place*, the local 'structure of feeling' as defined by Williams (1973) (Agnew 1993: 263). The advantage of this approach is that it simultaneously focuses on the subjective experiences of people (structure of feeling) and their responses to both the subjective landscape (locale) and the objective landscape (location).

To illustrate the relationship between these three factors and their impact on place attachment in the urban neighbourhood, I will draw on data gathered under the aegis of the BETWIXT project on deprived European neighbourhoods. The neighbourhoods chosen for analysis were defined as precarious – that is, while they were exposed to a considerable degree of disadvantage (high levels of lone parenthood, history of early school leaving, higher unemployment levels than the average for the city at large, higher levels of health risk including industrial accidents than the city at large, reliance on social housing) – they were not among the poorest and most disadvantaged neighbourhoods in any of the participating cities.<sup>3</sup> The rationale for such a selection was based on the research interest in those people who were resisting social exclusion and the fall into poverty.

A key goal of the study was to assess the significance of neighbourhood for the coping strategies of such households by identifying the resources (or lack of them) found in the locality and examining the nature and extent of the access which households have to those resources. The interviews, among other things,

**Table 1: BETWIXT Project: Precarious Neighbourhoods.**

City	Levels of Neighbourhoods (Population)		Unemployment Rates (%)		
			City	Neigh'hood	Year
Dublin (Ireland)	Kilmainham C	(3,446)	13.2	30.0	1990
Lisbon (Portugal)	Venda Nova	(16,000)	7.5	8.0	1991
London (U.K.)	Holloway	(15,082)	6.0	12.0	1999
Toulouse (France)	Bagatelle	(9,544)	13.2	30.0	1990
Turin (Italy)	Little Aurora	(5,565)	5.6	6.0	1991
Umea (Sweden)	Ersboda	(7,872)	8.8	13.3	1998

Source: Fahey 2000: 1.10.

examined how respondents relate to their neighbourhoods in their day-to-day lives and so provided in-depth information on neighbourhood dynamics. The householders with whom the research team spoke covered a broad spectrum including traditional families, older people often living alone, lone parents, families from different ethnic backgrounds, and single people. Over the course of 1999-2001, interview data was collected in each city and the local research teams met regularly. We presented and discussed at length transcripts of our interviews for each city and draft chapters of comparative findings. As the project moved from data gathering to analysis, I was drawn to the recurrent theme of place in the interview transcripts for Dublin. It was clear that people drew on a reservoir of stored memories and images of their place in their negotiation of everyday life in the neighbourhood. My participation in the Culture of Cities project, which had also commenced in 1999, had piqued my interest in the meaningfulness of place in the context of the contemporary city. I therefore re-engaged with the data from the participating cities in the BETWIXT project with a new question in mind: How is sense of place socially constructed, elaborated, and expressed in the context of the precarious neighbourhood? Here, I am taking materials gleaned from the BETWIXT project but addressing them in light of the interests of the Culture of Cities project.

The data revealed some consistency in terms of how residents across the cities related to their locales. Based on my reading of the data, it is possible to categorise respondents' sentiments in terms of three dominant 'structures of feeling': a sense of place, a sense of placelessness (that is frequently resisted) and a sense of displacement. These categories are not mutually exclusive, but rather emerge as points of orientation in response to the changes occurring in the neighbourhood.



## **A Sense of Place**

When we moved in here [in 1929] that road was there but there was no through road at the top. The canal was there but no bridge. Drimnagh [an adjacent neighbourhood] wasn't yet built....it was a brick works with the big chimney, steeples and a quarry. Kids were drowned in that quarry too. There was a hill that was probably built out of what came out of the quarry. We used to play on it. Old motor car bumpers, we used them to slide down the sides. But that extended right over to the wall of St. James Gate...that whole area now is changed. Here [on Suir Road] you could play football on the street safely. We could play snowballing in the winter. We played *rellevio*. A plainclothes garda [policeman] used to come around on his bicycle and if he found you playing football he could charge you or give you a telling off. We would see him coming, and we would all run up the passages [back alleys]. Playing football on the street, that was the height of the garda's problem. [Respondent, Kilmainham Dublin]

Whereas in the past, the little local shops were a point of reference for everybody, you met at the bakery and had a chat, you knew each other and said hello.... in the last three or four years, these shops have disappeared and there's less opportunity to meet. There aren't enough meeting places, there's nothing left in the area, not even the old associations, not to mention the football clubs we used to go to in the 1970s. [Respondent, Aurora, Turin]

I dunno, its changed, the only local pubs that I know are really crap, they used to be good local pubs where you'd go in, you'd have a laugh, there'd be someone in there all the time that you knew, no matter what day of the week, no matter what time of the day.... [Now] they're just too corporate, they're too expensive, and there are no real lads in there having a laugh like. [Respondent, Holloway, London]

Old time residents of the neighbourhoods display a strong sense of emotional rootedness to their local area. This is predicated on a sense of the historical past and feelings of nostalgia often arising from the experience of a lifetime lived almost exclusively within the locale. The neighbourhood's past and, in particular, embedded memories from childhood form an integral part of their interpretive frameworks. Our interviews were gathered at a time when the neighbourhoods were undergoing transformation from gentrification (in Dublin and London) and from increased ethnic diversification (Turin). These changes are viewed and interpreted through the summoning up of collective memories of how the place 'used to be.' When asked to talk about the neighbourhood, respondents frequently resorted to elaborating specific memories – of childhood games on the street, of sociability between neighbours, of communality born of

a shared hardship. They recounted stories of how the neighbourhood came into being, how they came to be located there, and how their sense of attachment to place was developed and nurtured over the years through their immersion in close familial and neighbour networks. Attachment to place seems to derive from composite memories of people and experiences – a game of football played on the streets, a gossip at the local bakery, an afternoon spent with friends in the pub. These are all practices of doing and sustaining shared history and collective memories. The continuing sense of place is predicated on sedimented memories like these, which are laid down over time. According to Hummon (1992), biographical experience within a locale can transform the local landscape into a symbolic extension of the self by imbuing it with the personal means of life experiences. The ambiguity of place here is evident in the divergence between how the place continues to be imagined, and how it has actually changed. The material characteristics of the neighbourhood have altered – the roads are no longer safe to play on, the local shops are disappearing, the local pub has taken on a yuppie veneer – yet the memories of the neighbourhood as a particular kind of place remain highly salient for those who live there.

### **Placelessness and its Resistance**

While place attachment involves positively experienced bonds, these bonds are tested in the face of changes in the people, processes, or places (Brown and Perkins 1992: 284). Marginalisation of the neighbourhood and the people who live in it may be experienced as alienation. For example, our respondents spoke of exhaustive waits to gain access to basic social services, the ‘address effects’ and stigmatisation associated with living in a deprived area, and the seeming reluctance of city administration to address deterioration in the physical environment. However, marginalisation and feelings of placelessness may be resisted through a continuing attachment to sense of place. In two of the three blocks of public flats at Tyrone Place, in the Kilmainham neighbourhood of Dublin, for example, community sentiment is attenuated and ambivalent. Many residents feel trapped in a ‘bad part’ of the neighbourhood, have little sense of local identity and view the possibility of moving out positively. But while there is a palpable sense of placelessness, there is also a basis for resistance:

This used to be a good block but now look at it. It’s the worst block now. The stairs are terrible; you get vomit and people going to the loo and not just a piss. There’s used durex and syringes and everything, it’s terrible. Years ago it was different, people kept the place clean. Years ago you had friends on all the balconies. My ma and the others used to clean every Saturday evening. There’s only a couple of us who clean it now. [Tyrone Place Respondent, Kilmainham, Dublin]

There's none of the old tenants left in this block. In the nine years I've been here there's only one neighbour still left. That's a lot of turnover. It was lovely when I first moved in. The neighbours were nice. Then, I won't call them scumbags, but a different crowd of people moved in. It's hard cause you build up a relationship with them and then they move. There's no committee to stop people from wrecking the place. There are some drug dealers living here now and others just come in and deal at the gate where the kids are playing. They just don't care and people are afraid to stop them. I'd run them cause you have to stand up for yourself and your kids in this block or they'd walk all over you. [Tyrone Place Respondent, Kilmainham, Dublin]

Tyrone Place seems, from the outside, to be a fairly stable and relatively successful housing complex. For the tenants, however, internal differentiation is a reality that has a strong impact on place attachment and quality of life. Anti-social behaviour such as drug dealing and intimidation are widely experienced. People who do not live in the estate may deal drugs in the forecourt, hide from the police, and generally use the stairwells as a toilet. Exposed to such anti-social behaviour, parents have a genuine fear for their children's safety. As a result many would like to be re-housed. This desire to move can be seen as a strategy for coping with feelings of *being out of place*, of a disruption of attachment to place and to a local collectivity. On the other hand, here are people who continue to clean the public areas outside of their homes, who challenge the drug dealers, whose self-image of themselves in relation to the collective memory of place gives them the ability to differentiate themselves from their current environment and draw the strength to resist from the memory of 'how things used to be.' A sense of place, therefore, is an important non-material resource, which is called upon by the local residents in their struggle to cope with precariousness, and in this instance, the material degradation of their place.

In the neighbourhood of Aurora in Turin, tensions run deep between Italians who had migrated from the South and established their presence in the neighbourhood, and incoming groups of immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees. Long-term working class residents see the district's identity threatened by the arrival of foreigners who speak other languages and have different customs. Crucially, there is another factor at work here: in the context of a de-industrialising neighbourhood, foreigners are seen as competition for limited resources. Thus, the respondents in Aurora express a range of prejudicial attitudes and betray feelings of alienation:

It's changed because of all the foreigners. Before we were all from the south and things were okay. Now there are already five or six [immigrant] families in our building. They have no respect, they don't adapt to our laws or ways of doing things. [Respondent, Aurora, Turin]

## *Place Attachment in Marginalised Neighbourhoods*

I'm not a racist, but these foreigners are really crude, for example, when I'm walking down the street with the children they whistle at me, they make comments and it bothers me because I'm with the children, or at night they break their beer bottles on the ground and if I take the children around they risk getting cut. Anyway, a woman can't go out alone in the evening. It's as if there is a curfew. [Respondent, Aurora, Turin]

It was impossible to live in that building, especially with our kids... for example, the immigrants used to spit on the stairs, they got blood on the stairs because they kill hens at home, they hung out their coloured washing above ours and it dripped down, and then there were often fights among them and we had to call the police. We sold the flat at a big loss because the building had depreciated so much in value. We decided to stay in the same district but in a quieter area. [Respondent, Aurora, Turin]

Our respondents experience their place as under threat, and react accordingly. Their self-definition becomes territorially based and inward looking, as part of a resistance to how their place is changing and their lack of control over that change. They tend to close more and more in on themselves. Residents spoke of disengaging from the neighbourhood, of keeping their families and children at home and closely monitoring their movements, and of withdrawing from the civic life of the street. Those with more resources move to less heterogeneous enclaves within the neighbourhood.

Similarly, in Holloway, London, some original working class residents felt threatened by those coming from outside, sometimes reacting violently. Long-term middle class residents may also feel this, but living mainly across the railway line, they can rely on their spatial segregation to distance themselves on class or race lines from incomers to the neighbourhood.

In the more deprived sections of the neighbourhood of Holloway, local women spoke of their involvement, both past and present, in attempts to curtail the degradation of the environment through vandalism and poor maintenance. Their commitment to the place is born out of a history and sense of rootedness there, and this forms an important component of their mobilisation and resistance to their exclusion. One such resident recounts her ongoing battle with the local council to have basic services maintained on her public housing estate. She is acutely aware that if certain basic repairs are not carried out, there may be an escalation in the spiral of decline. The estate may become ripe for colonisation by undesirables such as drug dealers:

I fought myself for two months to get 10 lights on this estate fixed, you wouldn't believe the excuses I was given... they had the wrong screwdriver! He then tells me 'I promise they'll be done tomorrow, promise, promise, promise' – come 4 o'clock and it's dark and they're still not done... lack of

communication. I eventually got them done by screaming at the last Housing meeting about lights, by ringing up and saying I was going to the *Islington Gazette* [the local newspaper], by marking the lamp-posts that were not working because they were coming around in the day time and can't see which lights are out.... I'd have cried with frustration... And it's these little things that could make this area a better place to live in. [Respondent, Holloway, London]

In the Bagatelle *quartier* of Toulouse, the population is overwhelmingly of North African origin in terms of ethnic composition. The neighbourhood consists of a series of high-rise tower blocks, sited around relatively open public spaces. A range of municipal services and facilities including school and health services are provided locally. But this also means that there is little interaction between the people of Bagatelle and other city communities. Furthermore, many respondents expressed the view that because they were perceived by the authorities as second-class citizens, they were provided with second-rate services. For example, in the case of the provision of a local nursery school facility, residents were clear about their 'place positioning' in the context of what they perceived to be a two-track renovation programme being run by administrators in Toulouse:

There were mice in the prefabs [of the nursery school] that roamed all over the children's toys, their crayons and all that. Cats came in at night and urinated. In the morning, the smell was so bad you couldn't go in. The children had to go to outside toilets in the freezing cold. The canteen was not up to the legal sanitary standards. Dirty things were mixed with the clean. It was a horrible place. [Parents eventually complained to the Mayor's office but were told that other schools had priority for refurbishment.] He [the mayor] said yes, that he would do something, that there was a project in hand but that another school had to be done first. They had already modernised other schools! At Jolliemont. That's a nice place Jolliemont! 'You see,' I said to him, 'We're at the bottom of a cul de sac, tucked away from everything. Nobody can see us from the main road.' Out of sight, out of mind. [Resident, Bagatelle, Toulouse]

In all of the neighbourhoods there is ample evidence of a resistance to placelessness. Residents, facing changes that have a deleterious effect on their quality of life, must rely on their own capacity to act as part of a repertoire of coping strategies. In the examples shown, the residents' agency is enlivened through a strong sense of difference from their material conditions of existence and the use of this sense of difference to act in their own interests (by complaining, by moving, or by trying to reinvigorate a sense of place). Neighbourhoods and communities are imbued with public meanings and, as such, serve as symbolic locales with distinct cultural identities. As we have seen in terms of residents'

formulation of a sense of place, selective appropriation of favourable community imagery for self-characterisation simultaneously facilitates the construction of a positive self-image. This self-image is challenged when the effects of de-industrialisation, state abandonment, and gentrification begin to play themselves out within particular urban neighbourhoods. These streets, balconies and housing projects are on the front line of these broader social, economic, and political changes.

While many residents express feelings of alienation, they nevertheless draw on a repository of positive place attachment to counter the encroaching forces of placelessness. In the Dublin neighbourhood, the anti-social behaviour of drug users and dealers has had a severely deleterious effect on quality of life in parts of the neighbourhood, but the residents have fought back. Currently, there is a major urban renewal plan being implemented by Dublin City Council in partnership with local residents to revitalise Kilmainham, with an emphasis on sustainable housing and economic development. Similarly, in Holloway in London residents continue to meet, to form committees, and to lobby to improve the living conditions of the most deprived estates within the neighbourhood. In the Turin neighbourhood, immigration evokes problems of law and order in the public imagination. The interviewees associate foreigners with drug trafficking, delinquency, and brawling. They worry that the neighbourhood is changing, that it is losing its identity, and that the social fabric is falling apart. Their response is either to move to other, less ethnically diverse areas within the neighbourhood, or to close inwards, to limit their mobility and minimise contacts beyond the immediate family network. In the Bagatelle neighbourhood of Toulouse, on the other hand, a sense of being out of place arises among the largely immigrant population because of the stigma associated with living in a neighbourhood that is ethnically homogeneous and almost totally self-contained. In other words, the neighbourhood is cut adrift, through spatial and social boundaries, from its urban hinterland. Residents try to counter their marginalisation by challenging their 'place positioning' within the imaginary of the city administrators who determine their material conditions of existence.

## **Displacement**

The built environment has a role as a non-verbal medium for the communication of moral reputation, social rank, and other significant qualities of self (Hummon 1992). This is brought into sharp relief when processes of transformation are underway. The process of gentrification is in an advanced stage in Kilmainham in Dublin and Holloway in London. A different kind of newcomer – the affluent, professional worker – challenges the shared history and collective memory that the longer-term residents associate with sense of place.

Most of the residents interviewed fear there will be little or no integration, either socially or economically, between the new residents of the apartment blocks and the existing 'community':

The neighbourhood is changing with the building of the new apartment blocks. There are new apartments around the old terrace but you only see them [the residents] driving in and out in their cars. That's the only point of contact. They drive in behind those gates, and the gates are locked. They shop outside the locality so there's no regeneration of the neighbourhood going on. [Respondent, Kilmainham, Dublin]

The landscape is changing with the arrival of these new gentrifiers. While urban regeneration will bring much-needed investment into the area, long-term residents are concerned about what may be lost. Gentrification pushes housing prices beyond the reach of the local population, thus leading to further displacement, and the fragmentation of the extended family unit. Without a network of support, ageing parents may see their quality of life deteriorate. Those who move may also find themselves in a precarious situation as they, too, have lost these networks of support and attachment to place. Furthermore, the social networks that sustained the neighbourhood over the years are not likely to be maintained if newcomers don't wish to engage:

The new apartments tend to be surrounded by walls and gates. There is a big emphasis on privacy and that creates barriers. You can't create contacts across gates. People isolate themselves inside the gates, they create their own patch and don't want to get involved. This is different to having an openness, an awareness that you are living among different groups, and different age groups. On this estate you cannot assume that you are living beside people who are young. Two or three doors up from you there could be an elderly person or couple. There are lots of ages living around here but yet everybody can kind of interact. Some of the houses are now being bought by people who are anonymous, who don't want to know or get involved and that is offensive to people. [Respondent, Kilmainham, Dublin]

Similarly, parts of the neighbourhood of Holloway in London are moving upwards socially as a result of a buoyant housing market. The demographic composition is changing and residents have difficulty coping with the sense of displacement which is induced:

Well the people were poorer in those days [the 1920s and 1930s] and we used to sit on the steps chatting... if one of you was sick, two or three would be in doing the washing... people now are too much into themselves. [Respondent, Holloway, London]

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Things have changed so much though... its because you've got the poor people who are literally living right on top of them... so you usually have areas don't you, like where it's a nice area on one side and you have like a poor area, and it's like this was always a nice area with poor people, and I think they've [gentrifiers] spotted that and gone... hang on, lets kick the rest of those poor people out and just turn it into a nice posh area. I used to have loads of mates along here... but I know one person that lives in this road now, but he's moving.... I've got no friends compared to when I was growing up. [Respondent, Holloway, London]

These observations were echoed in a feature article on the neighbourhood in a national newspaper during the period of field research:

Caledonian Road was once too poor, too run down and too near to King's Cross to attract the middle classes. Now, however, with money (private and public) having been poured into the area, it has been colonised by City and West End workers who can't afford Islington proper (Cunningham 2001).

Clearly, we can see here that the colonisation of Caledonian Road not only demonstrates an indifference to the local by the upwardly mobile, but that this colonisation has a homogenising effect on the neighbourhood. Sennett observes that the accumulation of shared history, and so of collective memory, diminishes in the neutral public space of contemporary global cities (2000). Equally, the accumulation of shared history becomes truncated when living spaces that formerly shared public space become increasingly privatised both socially and symbolically. The testimonies from urban residents living in precarious situations across European cities indicate heartfelt concerns about urban re-development, which is predicated on privacy, anonymity, and indifference to the local and vernacular quality of the neighbourhood. This kind of research conducted at the level of everyday life in the neighbourhood helps to illuminate the way various social identities can become embedded in and communicated through the local environment, reinforcing the sentimental bonds for people and places (Hummon 1992). It also demonstrates how place attachment articulations are imbued with a shared sense of history and collective memory. Newcomers neither feel themselves to be part of the community, nor feel the need to engage meaningfully with the community. Community sentiment becomes more fragile and more fragmentary, and this has impacts on the coherence of a sense of place. Place itself becomes more ambiguous as residents struggle to locate themselves within the changing environment, to hold on to the lineaments of a shared past, and to draw on that collective memory in mobilisation and resistance practices.



## **Conclusion**

In this era of globalisation it has often been commented that we need a notion of 'place' as stable, secure, and unique. According to Relph, if places are "sources of security and identity for individuals and for groups of people, then it is important that the means of experiencing, creating and maintaining significant places are not lost" (1976: 6). In the BETWIXT project we set out to explore the everyday experiences of residents in the context of the deprived European neighbourhood. During our fieldwork it became clear that the concept of neighbourhood itself is extremely problematic, both in terms of its meaning in spatial terms and in terms of residents' constructions of their significant communities and places. The problematic of the Culture of Cites project stimulated me to revisit the data collected in order to explore more fully the meanings attached to place and community sentiment in the everyday lived experiences of these city residents. Across all of the neighbourhoods explored, community is in transition and the notion of place is unstable, ambiguous, and contested. What emerges, therefore, is a problematic that links place, self-identity and the shared history and collective memory in the context of the modern European city, where change and innovation are conditions that force a response.

Residents' sense of attachment to place is connected to the micro-communities of which they form a part. This might be an area as small as the street on which they live or the balcony they share in a block of flats. There are clear intra-neighbourhood distinctions, which result in people in one area 'looking down on' people living in another area, even when they all share the same class position. This is a particularly acute phenomenon in the Dublin and Turin neighbourhoods, suggesting that there are important status distinctions in the neighbourhood that are socially and spatially reproduced. Patterned segregation is not new but was laid down over time. Although old-timers in the Dublin and Turin neighbourhoods (and to some extent the London neighbourhood) speak nostalgically about an Arcadian past when every family was employed and there was a strong sense of community, there were, at least in the Dublin case, always troubling intra-neighbourhood divisions.<sup>4</sup> This of course raises the question of whether or not there is such a thing as neighbourhood, given the fact that it is internally stratified, and that for many residents their social world is largely bounded by the immediate place where they live.

What is at issue is the dialectic of developments in self-identity and of developments in modern city places which challenge the old sense of place. These neighbourhoods and those who reside within them have been battered by the effects of de-industrialisation, environmental degradation, and stigmatisation. Yet they draw on their 'memory traces' to motivate and mobilise themselves to resist the effects of these exclusions. New challenges are now presenting

themselves. Chief amongst these are the issue of gentrification and the consumer relation to place that underlies it. Gentrification is seen as the answer for these neighbourhoods, which have suffered abandonment by the under-funded local state and the roll back policies of the welfare state. How is the long-term residents' sense of place attachment (and concomitant sense of loss when places change) to be integrated with a mobile, consumer society predicated on a global investment regime? Is it possible to ring-fence the older sense of place while simultaneously embracing the diversity, which is at the core of the post-modern, post-industrial city?

Is it possible to develop a concept of the neighbourhood as an 'unoppressive place' where the interests of all residents, including old-timers and newcomers, are embraced? Is it possible to revitalise the concept of 'community' in a way that affirms and enhances diversity? How might this be achieved? A recent study conducted in Toronto perhaps points one way forward (Banks and Mangan 1999). There, researchers developed an *action-based research* approach to address the question as to whether or not existing family, friendship, and neighbourhood networks could protect the quality of life of the community in the face of urban change. The research team established an action research process under the auspices of a locally-managed, non-profit community association. The research sought to employ a qualitative research approach to gather knowledge that would contribute to the understanding of informal and formal network relations; to help families identify and reinforce the indigenous strengthening components of their networks and to demonstrate the efficacy and practicality of this research process as a social planning tool, *to be employed by members of the community themselves*. Such a research approach has the advantage of encouraging reflexivity among the researchers and the neighbourhood residents, and the possibility of recognising and safeguarding the significance of a sense of place. In other words, urban policies and urban practices need to develop an integrated framework of analysis, which simultaneously addresses the locale (the city neighbourhood where social relations are constituted); location (the effects upon locales of processes such as de-industrialisation, environmental degradation and gentrification); and a sense of place – the local structure of feeling, time-deepened and memory-qualified. It may not be possible to create 'communities of interest' because of the tensions that arise over the ambiguity of place within the neighbourhood. Neither should we assume that those who have access to the least material resources in the city should be at the forefront of building and exercising collective capacity in response to broader social, economic, and political change. Nevertheless, it is clear from the foregoing analysis that for residents in deprived neighbourhoods their sense of themselves as agents and as members of communities are intimately bound up with a sense of place. Place attachment has animated, and

continues to animate, the urban dweller's imagination and repertoire of action in the contemporary European city.

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## **Notes**

1. Targeted Socio-Economic Research (TSER) BETWIXT Project: "Between Integration and Exclusion: A comparative study in the local dynamics of precarity and resistance to exclusion in urban contexts" 1998-2001. BETWIXT Project Co-ordinator Daniel Bertaux. The Dublin research team included the author along with Dr. Tony Fahey, ESRI and Mary Benson, Department of Sociology, NUIM. The City of Helsinki was involved in earlier stages of the project (city mapping, neighbourhood profiling) but not in later stages (neighbourhood and household research).

2. This term was used by Casimiro Balsa of the BETWIXT project to describe the Lisbon neighbourhood of Venda Nova, but also applies to the other neighbourhoods dealt with in this paper.

3. The approach adopted in the BETWIXT project was to take census enumeration areas as the starting point for the identification of neighbourhoods. This approach not only took advantage of the ready availability of census-based definitions of small area spatial unit, but also connected the second stage of the project with the first stage, which accorded a major role to the analysis and mapping of census data at small area level. A precarious neighbourhood can be thought of as 'betwixt' in the sense that it is geographically placed in the grey area between prosperous and deprived parts of the city. Furthermore, neighbourhoods may also be defined as precarious if they contain a large proportion of precarious households. In keeping with the concept of precariousness, the neighbourhoods selected were not at the bottom of the ladder of disadvantage, but neither were they so far up the ladder that they could be considered to have escaped disadvantage entirely. A small area unit therefore could be considered precarious if it was located on or close to the boundary between the bottom (fifth) quintile and the fourth quintile on a key indicator of disadvantage, such as unemployment rate (Fahey 2000).

4. Keogh Square, which was demolished to make way for St. Michael's estate, was one of the most notorious estates in Dublin. This is why in the 1970s, residents of private houses in the vicinity vehemently opposed the building of a new social housing

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complex on the same site. Although there were important local industries in the neighbourhood, these never catered to the residents of Keogh Square or later, St. Michael's estate. Local job provision was targeted primarily at the respectable working class, and not at marginalised communities. Class distinctions were also drawn spatially. The railway firm built different types of housing in the area for its management and shop floor employees.

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