From a local to global sense of place

The impact of connectivity on our contemporary understanding of sense of place based on field research of 18 European cities

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Abstract

In times of globalisation and increased connectivity the construction of sense of place is subject to change. In this article the impact of increased connectivity on the development of sense of place is researched through literature studies and field research. The field research covered 18 towns and cities in Europe, all situated along the Rhine, Main and Danube. The largest spatial scale that is addressed in this article is Europe. During this field research, we constructed a systematic and methodological framework to read sense of place. The basis of this framework consists of the four stimuli of aesthetics, people, activity and connectivity. These four stimuli together form the basis of what we call a daily trajectory. This article focuses on connectivity because we believe that this stimulus is determined for the quality of the daily trajectory and consequently, sense of place. When stretched over time, improved connectivity ensures the expansion of scale of what people call their place. As the world is becoming more interconnected through transport and media networks, the way in which we establish connections is important to safeguard a sense of place. In this article we show the importance of the four stimuli is their interconnection in a daily trajectory, and their intrinsic link with daily lives. We argue that contemporary understanding of the concept of sense of place should assimilate our ever more globally connected world while valuing the more persistent attributes of each place.

Keywords

activity, aesthetics, connectivity, daily trajectory, people, sense of place

Introduction

While sense of place is an important theoretical concept in disciplines like architecture, urban planning, policymaking, psychology, anthropology, and human geography we argue for the necessity to enrich our understanding of this notion for it to be meaningfully applied in practice. Those who participate in the theoretical discourse (e.g. Cresswell, Lewicka, Massey, Stedman) all agree that it emerges when people attach relations to places through memories, stories and meaning. Still, the concept of sense of place has been subject to change in an ever more globalising world. Although the understanding of sense of place in relation to globalisation has been discussed since the 1990s (by scholars like Massey), the topic is today relevant because of the acceleration rate of (human) movement through increasing connectivity.

The research described in this paper, which is based on a literature study and field research, aims to map the impact of increased connectivity on constructions of sense of place. It is important to note that the whole project was carried out by the two authors and Italo de Vroom. The three formed a group for the duration of the whole project. The field research took place in 18 cities spread over nine different European countries. Our assumption was that by increasing connectivity we could showcase how sense of place seems to be of great importance to the spatial and political landscape of Europe.

What the philosopher Zygmunt Bauman sharply calls “a liquid society” entails that we need to understand that people and places are never static, as seems often the
case in literature revolving around sense of place. Rather, places are always in transition due to outside influences. Rendering connectivity as a key element in sense of place might help us understand the relations people attach to their surroundings. Because, if we are getting to the root of the problem, what is currently experienced through the increase of outside influences, is often described as a loss of sense of place, a disability to grow roots. This can mean that one feels insecure and unable to establish relations with places. These relations form the base for a long process of attachment, an establishment of meanings and memories as described by researchers like Lewicka, Proshansky et al. and Stedman.4

Aiming to review the influence of connectivity on sense of place, this article is split into three sections: firstly, we outline existing theories providing us with a frame of references to map the development of sense of place. Secondly, we elaborate on our field research which covered 18 towns and cities along the Rhine, Main and Danube over a period of 5 weeks. Across the 9 countries that we crossed, over 90 people were interviewed. In this section, we will also elaborate on the practice of close reading to analyse a sense of place which is related to multiple spatial scales, with Europe as the largest scale.

This analysis resulted in four distinct groups of stimuli we believe help construct a sense of place: activity; people; aesthetics; and connectivity. The first three stimuli are also often found in the existing literature. Nevertheless we distinctively name them as they describe the daily trajectory of people and how these routines are particularly situated in places. More attention will be paid to the fourth stimulus, connectivity. We will show how connectivity is an essential element in the understanding of sense of place because it incorporates the dynamic aspect of it and highlights a research gap in the current studies. Thirdly, we will show how the four stimuli work together in a newly designed framework. The interrelation is described on the basis of a daily trajectory. Once one recognises that connectivity is a fundamental determinant of the quality of the daily trajectory and, consequently, sense of place, connectivity might be appropriated for collaboration and trust moving through scales: from the local to the global. We argue that considering connectivity as an important stimulus will have a powerful impact on creating a positive sense of place through scales.

**Current composition of sense of place**

In the 40-year trajectory of sense of place scholarship, multiple definitions can be found and different methodological approaches are applied to study its development. For the sake of clarity, in this paper we employ the following definition of sense of place: “The processes by which individuals or groups identify, attach to, depend on, and modify places, as well as the meanings, values, and feelings that individuals or groups associate with a place.”5 In the theoretical discourse concerning sense of place, all people seem to agree that it emerges when people attach relations to places through memories, stories and meaning. Safeguarding these attachments is of great importance for a sense of rootedness, a sense of self and belonging. Being able to “grow roots” means that one feels secure enough to establish relations with and attachments to places.6

In Europe we see signs of spatial and social disruption along with geographical fragmentation that diminish sense of place.7 The increase of social, economic and environmental complexity can be experienced as overwhelming.8 One of the effects of this development is that people can no longer connect harmoniously with their surroundings. Often current inhabitants indicate the new as the invader of so-called sound local places.9 Consequences can be hatred against newcomers and outsiders and an increase in nationalism. Already in 1977, cultural geographer Edward Relph argued that “a place” consists of the physical setting, activities and meanings. Of these three, he argues that grasping the component meaning is the most difficult: “[…] the meanings that places have to individuals and groups, run the risk of destroying authentic places and/or producing inauthentic ones”.10 A longing for an era where places were supposedly occupied by coherent, homogeneous communities can prevail.11

Twenty years later than Relph, Canter (famous for conceptual studies in architecture and urbanism) started writing about four, instead of three, components: “functional differentiation; aspects of design; place objectives; and the scale of interaction”.12 A compelling difference compared to the three components view is the “scale of interaction”. This component is closely related to our research since we investigate the understanding of sense of place on different spatial scales. According to Canter’s research, the socio-demographic variables will define which spatial levels become crucial for individual self-identification. Also, authors such as MacGregor Wise (2000) and Glissant (2019) state that rather than constructing uniqueness based on an internalised history within closed boundaries, the uniqueness of a place is partly composed of relations and associations with elsewhere.13

To a greater extent, authors like Agnew (1987), Massey (1994) and Pérez-Goméz (2016) stress that places are socially interrelated and never isolated. It implies that, instead of thinking of a statically bound sense of place, places are created via a penetrable network of relations. Elaborating further on this Massey (1994, 155) explains:

“A large proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself, whether that be a street, or a region or even a continent. And this in turn allows a sense of place which is extroverted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local.”
If we deconstruct the concept of sense of place, based on the above, it is strongly related to what we are calling a “daily trajectory”. A daily trajectory is based on actions and behaviour which take place regularly. In her book On Habit, the philosopher Carlisle elaborates on the historical and philosophical aspect of habits, which form a daily trajectory, and habitat. She explains that habits create stability, since they are regular moments in time. A daily trajectory, the repetition of habits, is moulded by a sense of place. If one connects with one’s habitat (i.e. tangible surroundings) one is more at ease with the daily trajectory. If so, Macgregor Wise explains that “Habits [...] become an automatic series of actions and seemingly divorced from conscious thought”. A daily trajectory becomes rooted in the place. It is notable here that a place contains many daily trajectories due to the diverse groups of people inhabiting it. This can complicate efforts to measure or distil sense of place.

It can be imagined that resistance appears when places are altered because a part of someone’s habits and recognition will be lost. However, we believe that it is innate to places that they are subject to change and, therefore, are never static. To describe places as how they are perceived, we need to see them in their everyday use, or as Lefebvre called them, the spaces can be seen as “lived spaces”. The term lived spaces was introduced by Lefebvre to articulate places that are perceived both physically and mentally by people. In order to understand spaces as lived and make the abstraction valuable and useful, a cohesive method should be used. Lefebvre argues that “The fact remains, however, that an already produced space can be decoded, can be read”. The different media used in our research, which will be described in the next part, contribute to reading the places as lived space, instead of statically bound places.

Method – field research

“We entered a new city, we travelled and embraced yet another town, always wondering what was waiting for us, always interested in the new. We could list the objects and gestures of every city, often beforehand – residential buildings, row houses, streets, pavements and greenery, square, the market, the town hall, churches, and the theatre. However, in every city the buildings have a different order and we had to stop, the place made us stop, she made us act. The fundamental information must be given in more precise words, the cities are made by differences. The signs, atmospheres and activities of the places we visited, we embraced and cherished, are the narration we deconstruct in order to reconstruct architecturally.”

This excerpt made during our research illustrates how places are products of action and produce action on their inhabitants and visitors. Each city produces itself differently due to its histories, geographical situation and inhabitants. Similarly, every living body produces itself in space and produces that space through differences. For our research, we travelled through Europe along the rivers Rhine, Main and Danube, from the North Sea to the Black Sea. We started in the Netherlands and travelled through Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania. During our travels we connected and collected stories to lay bare the narrations of the “multi-layered citizens” of Europe. Yuval-Davis explains that the multi-layered citizen is always situated in a specific place, but “is not limited to a so-called nation-state but encompasses a more total relationship between the individual and society”. To collect useful knowledge to substantiate the view on the construction of sense of place, also between places, we set out on a field research to analyse 18 towns and cities along the Rhine, Main and Danube. We travelled with an old-timer Peugeot van, which made it possible to see the changes in landscape between the destinations, as well as within each town or city. The trip took place over a period of 5 weeks during the winter of 2019. In total, more than 90 people were interviewed across the 9 countries.

After entering every town or city, we positioned our van on the main square to carry out our research. We picked the square as it is the heart of every European city, it is where daily lives collide, it is the umbilicus as Sennett would describe in his analysis of the city through anatomy. In all the 18 places the same research methods were applied. We used two methods in particular, namely close reading and deconstruction through photography, film and interviews.

The specificities of a place, which create the distinguishable narrative of each place, can often be found in the details of the built environment. Observing details can be compared to close reading, which is a method often used in the academic field of linguistics and literature. It concentrates on the formulations and directions made by the author to get a better understanding of the meaning of the text studied. This method, as described by Havik, can also be applied at a spatial level. Thereby one looks at the spatial characteristics and the atmosphere, as well as the activities and daily trajectories of the inhabitants. Reading the encapsulated/socially constructed narratives in the built environment helps in understanding local qualities and gives them an

Figure 1. Van parked along the road. Iron Gate, Romania. By Van Riel, Vogel, de Vroom 2019.
opportunity to build further on this knowledge. Through different media a detailed and systematic way of close reading, analysing and comparing the 18 towns/cities was set up.

Photography was used to deconstruct the square by means of architectural elements, such as facade, windows and ornaments. Film, on the other hand, was used to capture the dynamics and sounds of the places. The soundscapes recorded through film beautifully capture specific sounds that can identify differences between places, but simultaneously present similarities such as the ringing church bells as distinctive sounds throughout Europe. Furthermore, busy roads parallel to a square or street musicians construct totally different atmospheres which are difficult to grasp on still images. Lastly, interviews were conducted as a means of close reading. The interviews were taken in the form of a conversation in which slowly more profound questions were asked on what the places meant for that person. Besides questions about daily affairs, the interviews focused on finding out which buildings or events people attach most value to. These dialogues provided us with more intimate knowledge on how places are perceived and used by its citizens. In the field of architecture, this particular kind of knowledge is often overlooked, as expressed by a quote from the novelist Cees Nooteboom “Auf Architekturzeichnungen ist es immer still, in Städten nie”.24 Precisely this kind of knowledge is helpful to expand knowledge of a place.

**Four stimuli**

Scholars have applied multiple component views to describe sense of place and its coming into being.25 We believe that these views are too static to conceptualise sense of place for the purpose of applying in practices. Instead, here we introduce the concept of four distinct stimuli, substituting the passive concept of the multiple component views. On the basis of the stimuli we are able to analyse different places systematically, which allows for a meaningful reflection on sense of place as well as a comparison between places.

During our field research, we gathered around the table every evening to describe what we experienced that day. In these hours we described the visited place by means of aesthetics, people and activity, the first three stimuli (Table 1).

![Figure 2. Workstation set-up Passau, Germany. By Van Riel, Vogel, de Vroom 2019.](image)

In short, the first stimulus (aesthetics) helped us understand the physical appearance of the square such as the architectural elements and used material. As mentioned, and endorsed by Massey26, aesthetics is tightly connected to the imaginative sensibility of the place and to the ability to attach stories and memories to it. The second stimulus (people) describes different age groups, shared languages, the social aspects of family and friends and intellectual alliance (e.g. a stable political system through which people can connect themselves to). The third stimulus (activity) presents the dynamic of the place as well as, if possible, the recurring events. Despite the variety of activities that can be carried out, each activity marks, documents or names specific locations and routes.27 This results often that when there are fewer activities in a town or city, people can give less meaning to that place.28 Documenting these three distinct stimuli exposed us to the routine of social practices and how they are situated in space. As the importance of these three stimuli (although differently named) have been confirmed by several other researchers, such as Cresswell, Stedman, Macgregor Wise and Lewicka29, we will not elaborate further on these aspects.

When we returned home, we added the fourth stimulus: connectivity. The motivation to add this category is bifold: first of all our aim is to understand the impact of local and non-local scale on sense of place in the more

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<td>physical appearance of the square such as:</td>
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connected society of Europe. Therefore, we need to understand connectivity between places. Secondly, on the basis of our interviews we noticed that connectivity is also of great importance at the local scale. The fourth stimulus of connectivity brings a dynamic aspect to the debate and thereby does more justice to a full understanding of sense of place through scales.

Connectivity

Connectivity is related to the competence to move through space and create certain patterns which make sense together. As stated in the introduction, our society is becoming more dynamic as we move more freely over land and water. Where fishermen and hunters marked their territories by natural landmarks such as stones or trees, today increased connectivity changed this by a pattern of routes - connecting and relating greater distances. With the increase of connectivity, the marking out of places gets a whole new dimension. Exploring the stimulus of connectivity we see the importance of the well-functioning of routes to an even greater extent, especially for professions in urban planning, architecture and policymaking. Lefebvre argues that the routes are of greater value than the traffic which roams on them. Since routes are fixed they can manifest particular values. Routes, through connectivity, can link places. If one is able to move freely one does not think immediately of the distance of getting from one place to the next, but more about what the meeting with “the other” would have in store. This, thus, does not exclude knowing where we come from and where we go: “for space is never empty: it always embodies a meaning”. It indicates that, through connectivity, being “en route”, meanings are born that leaps through scales. If the opportunity is present to move from one place to the next, relationships can be established at different territorial scales.

But similarly, having good means of transportation on the local scale can give citizens certain freedom to do the activities they like and enhance their social relationships. This implies a well maintained and reliable infrastructure (walking, cycling, driving and public transport) is needed. Anthropologists Ingold and Vergunst point out that social relations are always set along routes within networks, never in situ. It seems obvious that for a lively public sphere walkable distances and public transport are important. Contrary, a public sphere which is motor vehicle oriented clearly diminishes the quality of public life. To exemplify the car-free squares we researched such as the one in the town Komárno or the city of Frankfurt am Main flourish with human interaction. Whereas the researched squares in Bratislava and Vienna are dominated with noise and movement of cars, isolating the public space and obstructing interaction.

Although the routes are laid out in advance, whether on the local or non-local scale, they are continually experienced differently. The concept of connectivity challenges the totalitarian drive of a unique singular root and instead focuses on the “fundamental relationship with the other”. In his book Poetics of Relations, Glissant shows how true roots are always in production in the present through the relations we establish with our past, future and surroundings. For him, difference and diversity are the motors driving universal energy. Differences are encountered when there is a well-connected network and when connectivity is enhanced. Movement should not be seen as a mere correspondence with our external world. It goes even further as, through movement, we tune in to the movements of those around us. Being able to move from one point to the next, whether by foot or for example public transport, gives citizens certain freedom and agency to enact their activities and social relationships. If the opportunity is present to easily move from one place to the next, relationships can be established at different territorial scales, ranging from the local to the non-local (Gustafson 2009).

As pointed out by Lefebvre, lived spaces are articulated and perceived both physically and mentally. We have also seen that when the first three stimuli are brought into contact with each other we miss a dynamic aspect that ties them together. With the stimulus of connectivity, we aim to grapple with this dynamic. Connectivity can be read both in terms of the physical manifestations as well as the mental impact these bring about in the inhabitants of towns and cities.

Daily trajectory & habits in relation to four stimuli

Important to point out is that in every town and city the stimuli might have a different sequence. The physical appearance differs, activities are distinct at each place and shared by different groups of people, and the manner of movement varies at each place. What brings everything together is the explicit recognition of the four stimuli, which we believe take place through the daily trajectory. In the following we will elaborate how the dynamics of the daily trajectory can be analysed to create a positive sense of place. We could describe the daily trajectory as follows: there are activities around which get you out in the public sphere; there is a reliable connection in order to get there; the route you take is comforting you by means of recognition and aesthetic familiarity, and it is important that experiences can be shared with others. The day-to-day cycle is a repetition of the four components.

As mentioned, the daily trajectory is based on actions and behaviour which are set out more or less regularly. Recent studies address how little has been said about the time which is needed to create a trajectory. Academic literature which focuses on concepts of place are often abstracted from everyday life experiences. We immerse ourselves in the idea that people are deeply involved in life by actively constructing it. Therefore we would like to use the visual analogy for the daily trajectory of a dashed line (Figure 3). The dashes circles are the habits carried out and
the open spaces are moments for changes or irregularity, illustrating a variability in a trajectory. The aforementioned does indicate that habits can change over time.

Rather than assuming people inhabit a fixed world, people experience places by incorporating patterns of life through meshworks - creating lived places. It is clear that a sense of place is always in relation to the experience of that which is external to the physical locality. Parts of us are linked with places elsewhere, think for example of communication (such as mobile devices) or social relations which are stretched beyond the boundaries of one’s town. Sense of Place should therefore not be seen as a fixed, authentic place of privacy but rather as an open and dynamic concept.

If we go back to the dashed line in Figure 3, the regular moments of the daily trajectory are alternated with changeable moments. This conception is nicely exemplified by Macgregor Wise in his example of a journey by car. While going out by car, people move through different territories that, at a certain moment in the journey, turns into habits, into a trajectory - “always stopping at that gas station for a drink and chips” - or the conscious attempt to change it - “trying different waffle restaurants”. These changes in movements and sensations can be the starting point from which new habits can be developed or existing ones changed. The changes, the open spaces are situated between the dashes. It shows the iteration between persistence and potential for changes due to a constant interplay. All in all, understanding this interplay offers potentials for urban planners, architects or even politicians to apply to their work.

![Figure 3. The dynamic aspect of sense of place. By Van Riel, Vogel, de Vroom 2019.](image)

The quality of sense of place determines how people experience their daily trajectories, how the dashes and open spaces are related and are formed. We believe that the four stimuli are a helpful tool to understand these relations, and thus the carrying out of a positive daily trajectory. We have used the results of our field research to arrive at a novel analysis framework, as depicted in Figure 3, which can be used to judge, and even measure, the quality of sense of place and thereby lay bare potentials that architects, policymakers etc. can apply in practical ways. Key to the approach is to analyse the sense of place on the basis of four concrete stimuli: activity, people, aesthetics and connectivity. When all of these stimuli are ranked highly by the inhabitants, there is a high likelihood that the quality of the sense of place will be high, providing strong support for people to appreciate and want to retain their surroundings. These four stimuli provide the basis for stories within places. They address the setting, the actors and the activity and thereby they establish a trajectory.

**Conclusion**

In this paper we have given an overview of current sense of place thinking followed by the description of our field research within Europe. This research gave us data to develop a framework to understand and communicate sense of place. Within this framework we speak of four stimuli which address the active act of creating and living with a sense of place. Furthermore, we elaborated on the stimulus of connectivity as we believe this stimulus highlights a research gap. We have shown how connectivity is an essential element in understanding sense of place. We note that the framework has been developed empirically based on a limited but sufficient set of data. We suggest that it may be of interest for a future project to evaluate this framework more rigorously. We conclude this paper by marking out the relevance and value of this framework in relation to the current situation in Europe.

As one may recognise, although the increase in connectivity has brought prosperity to many, the fading of economic and cultural boundaries has not served all European citizens well. From our experience, we sense a shift in mentality by which people are more directed to define their own safe places through control, nationalism and contraction of tightly bound place-identities. Different groups of people are trying to “reassert some feeling of control” and “contractions of tightly bound place-identities” are arising. Parts of Europe seemingly try to use physical means to close themselves off from other parts. A longing for an era where places were supposedly occupied by coherent, homogeneous communities prevails. Getting to the root of the problem, what is experienced through the increase of outside influences, is a loss of sense of place, a disability to grow roots.

We believe that places are formed from multiple connections and cannot be seen as static, “safe” entities. These connections can be at multiple spatial scales, ranging from the local scale to - in the case of our study – the scale of Europe. We argued that an important aspect of establishing connections at different territorial scales comes forth from the freedom to travel, of connectivity. We believe that sense of place is partially constructed through connectivity and may actually be enhanced by it. "A given environment should not receive an outside influence as something additional to itself, but as a stimulant intensifying its own particular way of life".
approached in this manner, connectivity as a carrier of these outside influences, can increase our sense of self.

To conclude, once one recognises that connectivity is a fundamental determinant of sense of place, it is not a stretch to anticipate that over time, with improving connectivity, people will expand the scale of what they consider their place. Within Europe, scale can expand across borders; with remote communication between people, use of common languages and easy access to transport, lengthening routes connected to roots. If we embrace this fact and use a framework which allows us to address connectivity as a fundamental facet to create sense of place, the inward-looking tide in Europe might be turned to opening up for collaboration and trust.

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Endnotes

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