

Place Experiences: The Built Environment as Social Capital

19

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Abstract

This paper explores the value of place with an emphasis on creating spaces that encourage the bonding of people to place. The connection to place in education is supported by community-based art education. Educators and students should understand their roles in creating spaces with characteristics that encourage place-person bonding, and the potential these places hold to enhance the social capital of communities.

The Black Dog Café

I pull into the parking lot of the Black Dog Café, a small cozy coffee shop that resides in what was once the storeroom of the American Legion Hall. Black Dog is one of a dozen businesses that surround Lake Ella where walkers are already out pushing strollers and walking dogs. Inside the café a steady stream of customers order coffee, tea, pastries and bagels. As is the case most mornings, many people sit and linger to catch up on the news of the day.

The atmosphere at Black Dog resembles a friend's living room: residential, comfortable, and welcoming. Just inside the front door patrons relax on a futon sofa, which transports me back to a college apartment from years gone by. Last year's Christmas twinkle lights have become a permanent fixture adding sparkle to the coffee bar. The walls are covered with pictures of employees' children and flyers featuring special events. There is an interesting combination of funky coffee shop décor mixed with images of veterans and other military paraphernalia reflecting the coffee shop origins. Over the futon is a sign that reads, "Veterans Museum" complete with an American Legion flag on the wall. Local musicians, artists, and authors show art and display their CDs and books. The open-air deck at Black Dog Café is packed with coffee drinkers reading their daily papers and enjoying the shade provided by the huge live oak trees that shelter patrons from the sun.

Carla, the owner of Black Dog, sits at the bar casually talking with customers as they stop in for their morning coffee. She carries on a conversation with several patrons about the problems with growing landfills and the importance of recycling. She moves on to a conversation with Sam, a New Yorker transplanted in Tallahassee, about the meeting of a grassroots organ-



Figure 1. Entry to the Black Dog Café.

ered Black Dog a few months ago and has been a regular ever since. Sashia, a new mom, is sitting in a comfortable chair holding her 9-month old baby boy Alex, and drinking coffee. Most of the customers stop to visit with Alex, and Sashia boasts that he is standing up on his own. Megan, a student, sits in a large upholstered chair, balancing her laptop, transcribing interviews for a research paper she is writing. Not only is Megan a regular to the café, she is a regular to this particular seat. It is essentially her chair, and she sits there every time she visits.

Another student sits outside on the deck meeting with her major professor to solve a dissertation crisis. She says she goes to Black Dog at least three times a week and says the staff include some of her best friends, although they do not see each other outside the coffee shop. If she misses a few days, they call to check on her. This student is far from home and these people appear to be serving as an extended family for her. As the morning crowd thins out, Sonny, the retired veteran yells a “goodbye, I’ll be back later

ization working on peace initiatives, to be held at Black Dog next Wednesday. Sam’s car is at the repair shop, so Carla offers him a ride, and they head out the door. “Be back in a minute,” she yells to Amy, a cheerful 25 year-old who works behind the counter serving coffee, scones, pots of tea, and buttery croissants. Amy, a college student, greets customers by name and catches up on their lives as she serves coffee.

Meanwhile, Sonny, a white-haired 80-ish retired veteran sits near the entry and serves as the unofficial greeter, offering a “good morning” to customers as they walk in. He discov-



Figure 2. Black Dog Café owner, Carla Reid.

this afternoon” and heads out the door.

For many of these patrons, The Black Dog Café is a home away from home, a place that makes the day better. People with the opportunity to frequent a place like Black Dog Café, which like *Cheers*, is a place “where everybody knows your name” are fortunate in today’s society. Research and social commentary in the last twenty-five years has explored the decreasing ability of people to connect with their communities and the people who live among them (Lippard, 1997; Tuan, 1980). Evidence on changing levels of neighborhood connectedness suggests that most Americans are less embedded in their neighborhood than their parents were (Kasinitz & Rosenbery, 1996). Putnam (2000) discusses the increasing disconnection of people from family, friends, neighbors, and social structures. His writing emphasizes the importance of social bonds as a powerful predictor of life satisfaction. He discusses the concept of social capital, which he defines as “the connections among individuals, social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (p. 19). Jacobs (1961) noted that social capital can be found in safe and organized cities. She argued that when cities are designed to encourage informal contact among neighbors, the streets are safer, children are better taken care of, and people are happier in their surroundings. Jacobs emphasized the value of the ordinary contacts with others where the person initiates the contact, rather than having it thrust upon them. These contacts often occur while carrying out the simple tasks of everyday life, such as shopping and running errands.

The design of the built environment can have a profound influence

on our ability to connect with others. Fleming and Von Tscherner (1987) express concern that Americans are suffering from a severe case of "placelessness". One place looks just like all the others with no special features or attributes to bind us to these places, making cities and towns less livable. Lippard (1997) says, "placelessness then, may simply be place ignored, unseen, or unknown" (p. 9). Researchers in the field of environment and behavior studies, and the planners, architects, designers, and artists who care about the quality of the built environment, are motivated by the conviction that they can create spaces that are more humane and enhance the ability of people to interact.

Such humanely interactive spaces are called 'third places' by Oldenburg (1999), in his book *The Great Good Place*. Third places are not our homes or offices, but the places in our lives that "get us through the day." Third places typically meet the following characteristics. They must be neutral ground, where people can easily join and depart one another's company and where no one has to play host. Third places also serve as a leveler, meaning there are no formal membership criteria and anyone is welcome. Conversation is the main activity in a third place and it is accessible many hours of the day. Third places have regular patrons who give the space its character. The physical structure is often plain and has a low profile, but the mood is playful. Finally, the last characteristic is that it serves as a home away from home. Black Dog is a third place in that it meets all of the criteria listed above. The place, although simple and unimposing, has filled a need in the community and brings both social and economic capital to the patrons and the owner.

Many questions must be addressed when artists and designers create third places that work for people and satisfy their functional as well as emotional needs. What causes people to bond with or become attached to a particular space? What contributions do these special places make to our communities and towns? What do these places mean to those who frequent them? How do these spaces contribute to life sustaining functions including issues of health and productivity? And finally, what can art and design educators do to help students understand the value of these places and the attributes that constitute the essential ingredients of these places?

Place Attachment

Proshansky, Fabian, and Kaminoff (1983) use the term "place attachment" when describing the state of attachment to places. Place attachment involves the interplay of emotions, knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors in reference to a place. Place attachment typically occurs after people have long or intense experiences with a place and the place acquires great personal meaning (Gifford, 2002). People may become attached to objects, homes,

buildings, communities, or natural settings. Rubinstein and Parmelee (1992) stated that place attachment is a set of feelings about a geographic location that emotionally bind a person to that place and serve as a setting for life experiences. Lippard (1997) describes place as a "latitude and longitude within the map of a person's life" (p. 7). She adds the "search for homeplace is the mythical search for the axis mundi, for a center, for some place to stand, for something to hang on to" (p. 27).

It is important to note that place attachment is transactional with the place influencing the person, while at the same time, the person is influencing the setting. The people and place interact to form the experience. It is important to remember that groups, families, community members, and even entire cultures often collectively share attachment to various places (Lawrence, 1992; Low, 1992; Hummon, 1992). Rubinstein and Parmelee (1992) suggest that life experiences have an emotional quality that produce a bond with the places in which these experiences occur.

Social relationships may enhance the activity of people-place bonding. A number of scholars indicate that bonding with places may be based on the presence of people (Cooper-Marcus, 1992; Low & Altman, 1992; Crumpacker, 1993). The social involvement of family, friends, community, and culture may be equally, or more important, than the place alone (Cooper-Marcus, 1992). Low and Altman (1992) point out the importance of people in the statement, "places are, therefore, repositories and contexts within which interpersonal, community, and cultural relationships occur, and it is to those social relationships, not just place qua place, to which people are attached" (p. 7).

Most physical environments are also social environments with norms regarding acceptable behavior. Many cultures clearly define how spaces are to be used. Spatial meaning is culturally transmitted and is integrated into the place identity of the individual through his or her experiences with the world (Proshansky et al., 1983). There are social definitions of settings, which consist of norms, behaviors, rules and regulations that define the use of various spaces. These definitions are not universally shared, but are part of the socialization process. People learn space and behavior norms early in life and develop coping mechanisms for creating privacy and managing territories, personal space and crowding. Lippard (1997) adds, "when we know where we are, we're in a far better position to understand what other cultural groups are experiencing within a time and place we all share" (p. 10). Even groups within a culture may attach different values and meaning to spaces that define the unique qualities of their group.

Klein (2000) explores the spirituality of place and emphasizes the value and meanings of places. She says places have meaning and can serve a role as repositories of local knowledge with the potential to hold personal

and communal memories. She adds that the term spiritual has many interpretations, but she views it as "an experience of extraordinary insights and/or revelations that one may have as a result of encounters with sacred texts, objects, or places" (p. 60). She says the viewing of places is uniquely personal and influenced by the cultural lens with which one views the world. She adds that place, like art, is open to multiple interpretations based on individual expectations and beliefs.

Education

Educators can design curriculum to raise awareness of the importance of place and the value it can transmit to communities. Students of art and design should be aware of the contribution they can make to society through the design and enhancement of places. Klein (2000) said educators should be sure to include real life concepts or issues along with the teaching of art skills and elements and principles of design. Rubini (2002) said one of the most significant things occurring in design today is the consideration of how design can positively impact society. Designers have the potential to enhance the everyday lives of people while contributing to the quality of communities.

How can students of art and design become more aware of their surroundings? What factors contribute to the creation of humane, human-centered environments? How can students develop the skills and knowledge necessary to create these environments? There are many possibilities for creating design curriculum that focuses on place. Curriculum should help students take the steps necessary to inform them of the essential elements in quality, human-centered spaces. In addition to reading research on the subject, students can develop their own eye by seeking out significant places. One way this can be accomplished is by keeping place journals in which students sketch or photograph spaces that have meaning to them and add narrative to better explain the nuances of the spaces and what makes them work (Waxman, 2003). Students may reflect on why they chose the space, the particular details and architectural features of the space, and what makes it feel welcoming or comfortable. They might also study the design features surrounding the space, such as the access to the street, access to views, and access to natural light. Students may study the ease with which people may gather and the accommodations in the space that encourage or discourage gathering. They may explore design issues as they relate to issues such as personal space, privacy, the ability to territorialize and lay claim to an area, even if for a short length of time. They may ask to whom this place might be important and who would benefit from the place. And, finally, they may reflect on what the space means to them. Klein (2000) says it is best to reflect on place and respond to it in ways that are personally meaningful.

She adds that “place [is] textured, multi-layered, and multicultural” and rather than drawing definite conclusions it is best to have multiple experiences and multiple interpretations.

Conclusion

Incorporating the study of place into art and design education allows students to become more aware of the nuances of their surroundings and better able to design places in which contribute to the quality of life. It encourages students to become active participants in their surroundings and to realize the important role they play in contributing to the daily place experiences of people. The Black Dog Café offers a social environment that provides a means of friendship and support for patrons. Anyone is welcome to join the Black Dog community and many people from all walks of life think of Black Dog as their “home away from home.” As the owner, Carla says, “these are my friends, my support system.” Black Dog Café is much more than a place to drink coffee, it is a place that supports the connection with friends and creates community. Focusing on places like Black Dog and other places in the socially constructed environment, the art and design curriculum can create the opportunity to better know our surroundings and the contribution they make to our daily lives.

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