



FALL 2019

CHAPTER 3

PLACE ATTACHMENT IN RELATION TO URBAN WATERFRONTS AND PLANNING FOR INDUSTRY

By: Charis May Hnin and Jennifer Vu Nguyen

ABSTRACT

Place attachment is a relatively new area of interdisciplinary study in the field of environmental psychology. It combines human geography and human behavioral psychology to explain how humans develop attachment to physical spaces. Since the theory emerged in 1992, place attachment has gained recognition and significance within the realm of community planning. Researchers continue to examine the formulation of human attachment bonds, demonstrating how applications of place attachment guide toward understanding how community-focused emotions, behaviors, and cognitions impact community development. Our study of place attachment to the East Thea Foss has revolved around analyzing public comments and applying an iterative coding process to reveal three core themes. These themes revolve around what various community stakeholders know, perceive, and envision for the tideflats of Tacoma. Along with presenting these themes, we provide practical recommendations for planners and decision makers to attend to place attachment and include community members in creating spaces that are valued and meaningful to diverse community stakeholders.

INTRODUCTION

Community planners and spatial designers cannot create equitable, resilient, and inclusive communities solely focusing on the aesthetic appeal, economic gains, or ecological aspects of their plans and designs. In order to foster inclusive communities that are welcoming and meaningful to a wide array of community stakeholders, planners must consider and incorporate the concept of place attachment in their planning and design practices. Place attachment refers to emotional ties that link people to places. The concept of place attachment, which emerged in 1992 as an interdisciplinary study within the field of environmental psychology, combines elements of human geography and human behavioral psychology. Since its conception, the significance of place attachment in community planning has become increasingly recognized. As researchers continue to examine how humans

As researchers continue to examine how humans form attachment bonds to place, place attachment is viewed as a guide for understanding how community-focused emotions, behaviors, and cognitions may impact or transfer into community development.

form attachment bonds to place, place attachment is viewed as a guide for understanding how community-focused emotions, behaviors, and cognitions may impact or transfer into community development. As the East Thea Foss experiences a period of transition, the gathering and analysis of various community narratives by planners and spatial designers can enable them to create inclusive, valued, meaningful shared spaces.



A VIEW OF THE MURRAY MORGAN BRIDGE, GATEWAY TO THE EAST THEA FOSS AND PORT FROM DOWNTOWN TACOMA CREDIT CHARIS HNIN

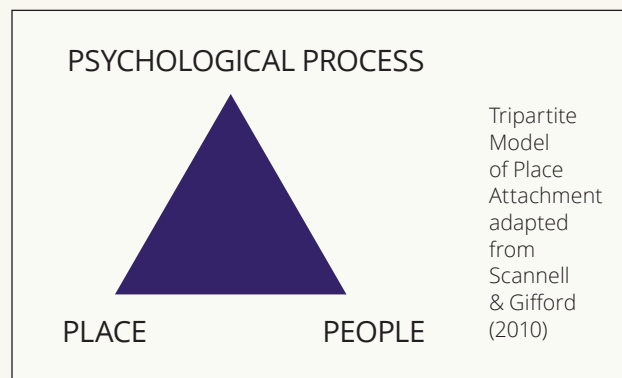
RESEARCH OVERVIEW

UNDERSTANDING PLACE ATTACHMENT THEORY

Although special attention is often given to design components purported to enhance a city's attractiveness to developers or its appeal to visitors, planning scholars and researchers are increasingly attentive to planning practices and design strategies that build upon the emotional, cognitive, and cultural bonds established between people and their communities. Place attachment, a prominent concept in environmental psychology that has only recently begun to gain more scholarly attention, encompasses connections between people's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors and specific locations. In the first book written about place attachment, authors defined it as the bonding of people to places (Altman and Low, 1992). In 2010, Scannell and Gifford proposed a tripartite model of place attachment (see Figure 1) in which place attachment is viewed as a space where people, places, and psychological processes interconnect and play upon each other (Scannell and Gifford, 2010).

It is critical to examine whose narratives have been included in the official record and to seek to include and consider narratives of those who have been historically overlooked or excluded.

Our research has not only focused on the theoretical and methodological framework of place attachment, but also on the way in which place attachment influences spatial and social planning disciplines, particularly relating them to the East Tea Foss. In order to incorporate the concept of place attachment into planning processes and



understand its applications, it is necessary to examine various elements of the theory: place identity, place dependency, and sense of place. Understanding place attachment requires the examination of identities, social dynamics, beliefs, and narratives that influence the relationship between people and places. Interdisciplinary analysis of environmental and community psychology can enable community planners to attend to place attachment in their work. Termed as "ecological perspectives," these insights provide deeper and richer understandings of how planning impacts human experiences of place, as well as how community-focused emotions, behaviors, and cognitions influence community planning and development processes (Manzo, 2006). Since different stakeholder groups with varying interests exist in every community, meaningful place attachment research requires ethnographic data that is representative of diverse populations. It is critical to examine whose narratives have been included in the official record and to seek to include and consider narratives of those who have been historically overlooked or excluded.

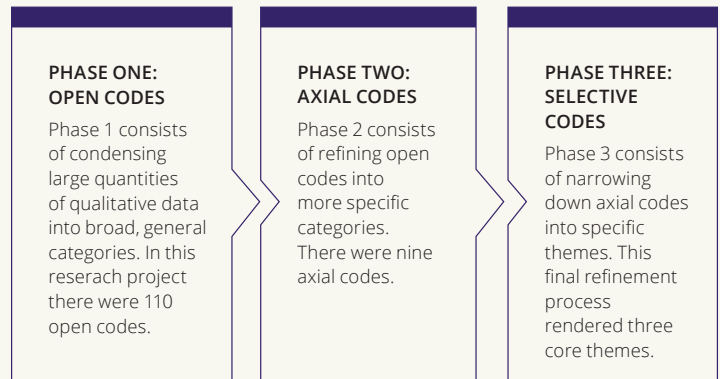
RESEARCH OVERVIEW (CONTINUED)

CREATING A GROUNDED THEORY FOR PLACE ATTACHMENT TO THE EAST THEA FOSS

In order to develop an understanding of attachment bonds experienced by diverse community stakeholders in relation to the East Thea Foss, we analyzed an archive of 287 public comments (500+ pages of content), all submitted in 2017 to the City of Tacoma regarding the Tideflats Interim Regulations. We acknowledge that these public comments do not reflect the voices and interests of all community members, particularly marginalized and historically underrepresented populations. However, the comments submitted do reflect a range of stakeholder opinions, those of longshoremen, residents, environmental activists, members of the Puyallup Tribe of Indians, small business owners, and various others.

We thematically coded the public comments to construct a grounded theory of place attachment for the East Thea Foss. The grounded theory method is a way of analyzing qualitative data; it entails collecting and processing information in such a way that the data itself reveals key themes (Charmaz, 2014). It is a nuanced and iterative process which enables one to condense large quantities of data and notice recurrent themes. First, data is sorted by broad categories called “open codes.” Further refinement of open codes yields more specific “axial codes.” Finally, axial codes are narrowed down into specific themes called “selective codes.” Figure 2 presents an illustration of our approach to analyzing data to create a grounded theory of place attachment for the East Thea Foss.

FIG.2 DATA ANALYSIS BASED ON GROUNDED THEORY



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Three specific research questions guided us through the iterative coding process to reveal core themes. This aspect of the grounded theory method, forming well-developed, synoptic questions, is key to generating findings relevant to one’s particular research goals. Presented below are the three research questions around which we aligned our data analysis process:

1. What bonds people to the tideflats?
2. What emotional and cognitive attachments create these bonds?
3. What kinds of spaces and activities seem to generate attachment?

Using these research questions as guides, we manually coded public comments; this yielded 110 open codes. Then, we uploaded the public comments to a qualitative data coding software called Nvivo. Using Nvivo, excerpts from public comments that reflected aspects of place attachment were sorted into nine axial nodes. Finally, we analyzed axial codes and sorted data into three selective codes. The selective codes convey the primary themes relevant to place attachment for the East Thea Foss

STUDY RESULTS AND KEY FINDINGS

The three selective codes which emerged from the third phase of the coding process are:

1. Community ambivalence toward change in the tideflats
2. Desire to shape and invest in the future of Tacoma and urban waterfronts
3. Conviction to preserve, protect, and steward the physical, socioeconomic, and cultural resources in and around the tideflats

In the following passages, we offer further elaboration related to how public comments coalesced around these selective codes, which we henceforth refer to as core themes.

CORE THEME 1:

COMMUNITY AMBIVALENCE TOWARD CHANGE IN THE TIDEFLATS

The third phase of the iterative coding process, when we categorized each public comment under a core theme, revealed that one third of the public comments revolved around the direct connection between what happens in the tideflats and the City of Tacoma as a whole. It is important to note that a multitude of different feelings surfaced under this theme: anxiety, caution, anger, as well as hope. Comments reflect how people’s coexisting and contending interests differ, and at times, collide, producing an overall sense of ambivalence toward the sort of change that should occur in the tideflats. This noted ambivalence does not, however, indicate that community members do not care about the tideflats.

Many comments displayed impassioned concerns related to the potential for fossil fuel industries to expand in the tideflats. These individuals focused on the risks fossil fuel industries pose, especially how they impact air, water, soil, and human health. Most of these individuals spoke in favor of interim regulations that would stall fossil fuel-based industrial development in the tideflats while the subarea planning process played out. However, there were others who repudiated the interim regulations; these individuals cited the potential adverse impacts on existing industries. Industrial and commercial associations submitted comments to bring attention to the critical role industry plays to support key functions on local, regional, state, and national levels.

Regardless of the varying positions regarding the interim regulations and fossil fuel-based industrial development, we can trace a myriad of place attachment bonds to the tideflats: emotional, personal, professional, cultural, and socioeconomic bonds connect people to Tacoma’s tideflats.

In view of all of this, planners and decision makers would be wise to refrain from assuming they know the opinions and positions of their constituencies until they have practiced meaningful civic engagement, which often requires an iterative and open communication process.

TOP 10 REPEATED WORDS

WORD	COUNT
Tacoma	129
Fossil	95
Future	44
People	22
Safety	22
Impact	19
Threat	19
Region	16
Health	14
Change	12

STUDY RESULTS AND KEY FINDINGS (CONTINUED)

CORE THEME 1:

COMMUNITY AMBIVALENCE TOWARD CHANGE IN THE TIDEFLATS (CONTINUED)

For us as researchers, recognizing the complexity, interconnections, and diversity of these bonds, helped us answer our first research question: What bonds people to the tideflats? The table shown illustrates the top 10 repeated words from the public comments we reviewed. Our findings related to this theme remind us that the forces which inform people and compel them to support or oppose projects are complex and varied. Additionally, the way members of the public conceive of and interpret proposed changes often appear directly tied to their firsthand experience, thoughts, and feelings about the tideflats. What is known about Tacoma's industrial legacy and the current environmental conditions of the tideflats

further inform individual perspectives. In view of all of this, planners and decision makers would be wise to refrain from assuming they know the opinions and positions of their constituencies until they have practiced meaningful civic engagement, which often requires an iterative and open communication process.

The way members of the public conceive of and interpret proposed changes often appear directly tied to their firsthand experience, thoughts, and feelings about the tideflats.

CORE THEME 2:

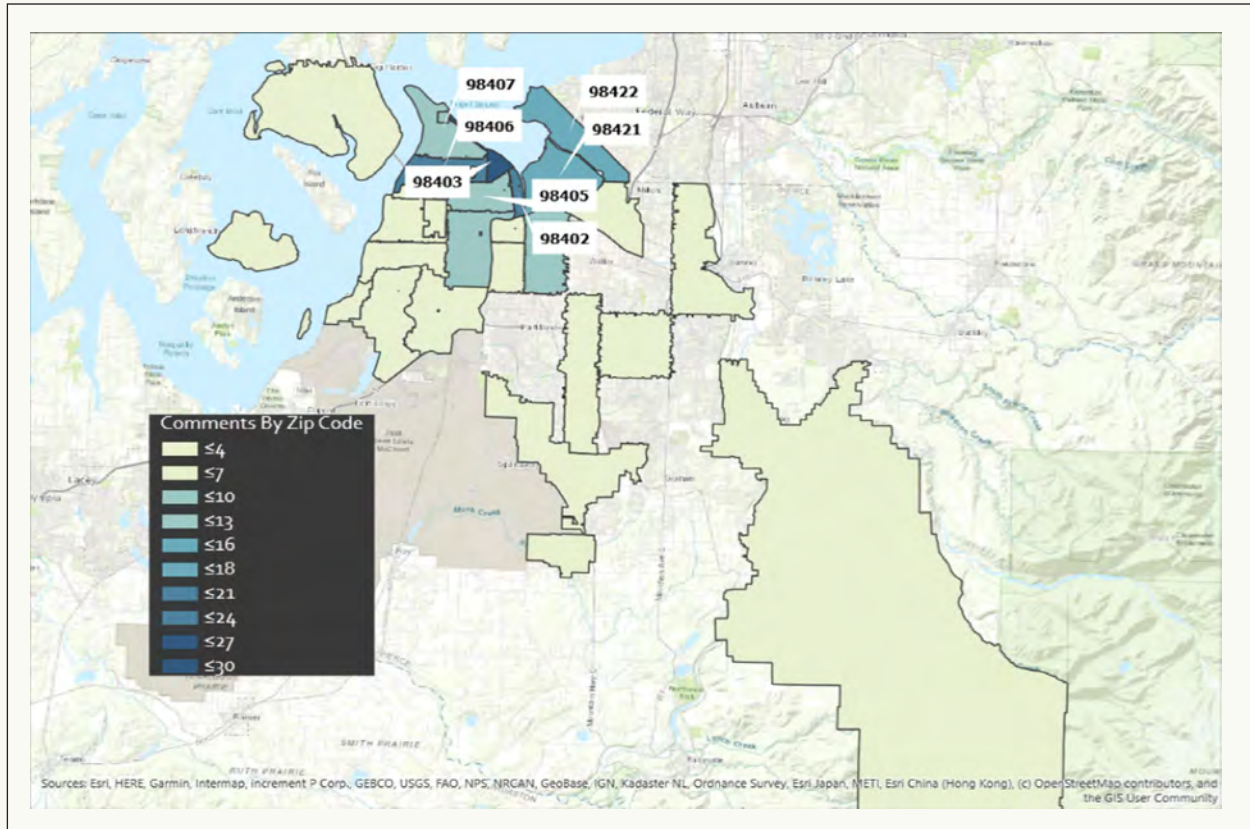
DESIRE TO SHAPE AND INVEST IN THE FUTURE OF TACOMA AND URBAN WATERFRONTS

A plethora of views surfaced related to the type of development that should or should not take place in and around the tideflats area. Although these views primarily reflect the positions and opinions of residents and businesses local to Tacoma, many people from the surrounding region also spoke up. To illustrate this point, we have created a map (Figure 3) which shows the number of comments from each Pierce County zip code.

Those who reside outside of Tacoma who participated in political discourse related to the tideflats view the Port of Tacoma, and all the waterways of the tideflats, as a regional resource. Many felt compelled to voice their opinions about how management of the tideflats should occur in the present as well as in the future. For example, an individual who lives outside of Tacoma commented:

"Growing up part of a farming family in eastern Washington, my faith was also an integral part of my upbringing and caring for God's creation is central to that faith. Creation sustains us physically, emotionally, and spiritually and we are meant to be stewards of the Earth, not to abuse or destroy it for our own selfish purposes. People of faith value responsibility, integrity, and justice for all, as well as stewardship, and we want to keep our waterways clean and neighborhoods safe for generations to come."

FIG. 3 PUBLIC COMMENTS BY ZIP CODE OVERLAID ON MAP OF PIERCE COUNTY



Since people have multiple ways of bonding to the tideflats and to Tacoma’s urban waterfront, their hopes and desires for the future of these places also vary. The following comments from Tacoma residents reflect common desire to shape and invest in the future of Tacoma’s urban waterfront. The particularities of how each person has developed their position and opinion regarding planning for the tideflats depend upon their experiences, beliefs, and feelings as well as their memories of the place.

“...since I moved here, our reputation is slowly shifting from a dirty second class city near Seattle to a gritty and interesting City with its own Destiny. Let’s make the tideflats a selling point rather than an eyesore to be crossed between the different parts of our city. The Planning Commission has the ability to work with the Port to make that happen.”

“Polluting industry may not want additional, meaningful regulations to be put in place, but the residents of Tacoma do. Tacoma has a sorted and polluted past, but this toxic legacy doesn’t have to spell out Tacoma’s future too. Please do the right thing for our community and for the future livability of this planet.”

STUDY RESULTS AND KEY FINDINGS (CONTINUED)

CORE THEME 3:

CONVICTION TO PRESERVE, PROTECT, AND STEWARD THE PHYSICAL, SOCIOECONOMIC, AND CULTURAL RESOURCES IN AND AROUND THE TIDEFLATS

In a musical score, multiple musical notes make up a single chord. If each public comment were a chord, then each would be comprised of multiple emotional notes. One note which resounded through many chords of our analysis is the belief that the tideflats are a public resource to be preserved, protected, and cherished. The reasons people come to share this sentiment, however, vary considerably. The way one views the purpose of the tideflats locally and regionally cannot be separated from how one has related to and experienced the tideflats in the past. Broadly speaking, the areas in and around the tideflats represent physical, socioeconomic, and cultural resources. For example, for members of the Puyallup Tribe of Indians, the Thea Foss Waterway is an essential natural resource tied to their traditional way of life. One tribal member commented,

“As you know, the safety of the tribal membership, our fishery, and our resources are of utmost importance to us and we have, and will continue to take, the necessary steps to safeguard these interests.”

The way one views the purpose of the tideflats locally and regionally cannot be separated from how one has related to and experienced the tideflats in the past.

This contrasts with a feeling of urgency to preserve the industries of the tideflats, which have offered economic opportunities and secure, living wage employment. A member of the public commented,

“My family and thousands like mine depend on these living wage jobs. This is nothing more than an attack on families, the middle class, and unions. Please do not regulate industries out of Tacoma.”

Although we can clearly see that the tideflats are important to people in a variety of ways, a common thread runs through these associations and reflects a shared sense of desire to preserve what individuals and groups of people perceive could be lost. We, as researchers, observed such conviction echoed across hundreds of public comments.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A myriad of emotional bonds exist and inform public opinions related to proposed development plans for the East Thea Foss. People spoke about their place attachments and stated their desire to take part in shaping the future of Tacoma's tideflats and urban waterfront. How might planners and decision makers proceed to integrate peoples' place attachments in planning for the tideflats? And, how might planners meaningfully include people in those planning efforts? We propose three tangible steps:

ONE

We recommend that all institutions involved in the Tideflats Subarea planning process coordinate their civic engagement efforts.

Inclusive engagement processes require that planners do more than solicit public comments in a project-based fashion. It requires planners to engage with the public during various phases of planning and development. During each phase, planners should analyze public perceptions and responses and share their knowledge and findings openly. In doing so, planners will gain understanding and be able to respond to what really matters to people. Such an inclusive process would also help foster coalitions and alliances toward building a more unifying, collective vision.

TWO

We recommend that decision makers and planners address the frustrations and aspirations voiced by community members regarding the future of tideflats development.

This will require them to develop an understanding of how place attachments affect individuals and groups of people in social, political, and economic

ways. This calls for time and resource investment on the part of City of Tacoma and Port of Tacoma officials, as well as representatives of other jurisdictions involved in the Tideflats Subarea planning process. It is important that these formal institutions also communicate to the public that they are listening and that the public's voices are welcome and valued.

THREE

We recommend that planners and decision makers value emotional bonds as assets, and let those bonds influence them in placemaking and decision making processes.

As evidenced, hundreds of people have exchanged their thoughts and feelings about proposed changes to the tideflats area. Some members of the public went so far as to offer specific, practical recommendations in their comments. One can argue that these individuals and groups have offered up their insights and emotional currency for public use. Why not integrate these insights as part of enhancing and making more meaningful placemaking and decision making processes?

CONCLUSION

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The comprehensive process of 1) researching the theory of place attachment, 2) analyzing aspects of place attachment in public comments, and 3) coding public comments to construct a grounded theory of place attachment for the East Thea Foss culminated with the development of two primary takeaways. Both relate to integrating an understanding of place attachment in community planning practices.

FIRST TAKEAWAY

The first takeaway is to refrain from forming romanticized associations of place attachment. Although the concept of place attachment may generally invoke positive connotations, the development of such bonds is extremely nuanced and may incorporate elements of repulsion, apprehension, and resistance, which we observed in many comments. In order to attain a more objective understanding of place attachment, as a complex, nuanced network of associations between diverse humans and places, it is prudent to recognize that people with varying and contending values wish to participate in the development of their communities. Recalling Scannell and Gifford's tripartite framework of place attachment, the following passages stand as suggestions for planners and decision makers grappling with the complexities inherent in people, place, and psychological process.

People: Planners should consider the multiple and intersectional identities of people who form attachment bonds to specific locations. Since human beings are social, emotional, physical, and spiritual beings who live in a complex world of competing interests, it is essential to remember that people should not be automatically and blindly categorized. For example, one should not assume that property owners would behave in a certain manner and only have certain interests; or that business owners would be proponents

In order to attain a more objective understanding of place attachment, as a complex, nuanced network of associations between diverse humans and places, it is prudent to recognize that people with varying and contending values wish to participate in the development of their communities.

of certain issues and opponents of others. Since one's identity is tied to contending and intersecting aspects which together influence their values and behavior, one's own values may conflict even while they coexist.

Place: Planners and decision makers should explore the locations to which people are attached and consider social, political, physical, and cultural representations of those spaces. For example, for some people, waterways are regional assets; for the Puyallup Tribe of Indians, the Thea Foss Waterway is an essential resource that constitutes their way of life; for others, the East Thea Foss represents a place of injustice, tied to the presence of the Northwest Detention Center. Planners should take heed of the fact that place associations are bound to identities and experiences, and different for different community stakeholders.

Psychological Process: It is important to understand that place attachment entails examining the psychological process of how bonds manifest. Psychological processes related to forming attachments to place are complex, informed by people's experiences as well as by their personal and social identities. Therefore, decision makers should take heed of how people mentally associate with certain aspects of their community. If people are expressing frustration,

it is worth exploring why they are frustrated and what their frustration may indicate. Since the City of Tacoma has a history of environmental degradation, the concept of industrial development is often associated with fossil fuel expansion. As a result, planners and decision makers should be mindful of this association and carefully state what it is they intend to develop when they refer to industrial development.

SECOND TAKEAWAY

The second takeaway is to view the importance of integrating people's emotional bonds to place within public decision making and in placemaking processes. This is important because human thoughts and beliefs are not static. They get acted upon and may change as, overtime, some of our thoughts and beliefs are subject to reinforcement, while others are not. In relation to political discourses surrounding planning and spatial design, individuals might behave in ways that support or hinder efforts. As Manzo and Perkins (2006) assert, "our thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about our local community places impact our behaviors toward such places, thus influencing whether and how we might participate in local planning efforts."

Overall, it is important to note that place attachment does not exist in a vacuum. Place attachment is deeply rooted in local history, politics, cultures, economy, and demography. Paying careful attention to how emotional bonds shape behaviors, narratives, attitudes, and values can help leaders and decision makers establish more nuanced understandings of their community stakeholders. In making sense of a community's behaviors, it is necessary to pay attention to all the tangible and intangible forces which influence people's

behaviors. Doing so might better equip community planners to engage meaningfully and strategically with the people most impacted by their plans. The diverse and varying interests and backgrounds of community stakeholders must be considered. Since the most marginalized sectors of society tend often to be excluded from planning and political processes, planners and spatial designers must find ways to meet and engage with them, and incorporate their perspectives and values in meaningful ways.

Finally, it is crucial to recognize that place attachment processes are inherently dynamic and mutable as a result of people's values and interests, and their consequent perceptions and attachments, constantly being acted upon. Place attachment is an interdisciplinary field that revolves around the connections among numerous environmental, social, and psychological factors. Changes to any of these facets may impact the development and maintenance of attachment bonds. Therefore, we suggest that community planners and decision makers heed the importance of place meaning by studying variations in levels of place attachment over extended periods of time.