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Favorite Places

Spatial and Temporal Dimensions of Place Attachment

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This article describes two of my favorite places and considers how my attempts at understanding my attachment to these places have matured. In moving from a quantitative to a phenomenological approach, I have found it possible to remain true to place attachment in both its spatial and temporal dimensions.

The Public Gardens in Nîmes

Les Jardins de la Fontaine in Nîmes, France, were created in the eighteenth century by the king's engineer, Jacques Philippe Mareschal (Ville de Nîmes 2006). His classical construction of symmetrical aisles and balustrades dominates the gardens' plan. In the nineteenth century, the gardens were extended following a design by Augustin Cavalier, the town's mayor. He aimed to attract walkers and nature-lovers with his sensitive arrangement of Mediterranean trees (holm oak, Aleppo pine, cypress) and other plantings.

My wife had shown me the gardens in Nîmes when we started dating in the 1990s. It was with great pleasure that we rediscovered them when we came to settle in France in 2008. The gardens are anchored in her family history, her mother visiting regularly in the 1950s and bringing her daughters there in the 1970s. As part of my effort to truly inhabit Nîmes when we moved there, I thought it fitting that I should study the gardens, and what better way than via a graduate program in environmental psychology at the city's own educational facility—the University of Nîmes!

It was to the gardens that we turned as first-year master's students in our first lesson of the semester dedicated to interviewing. I was delighted. Embarking on a daring career change, I received the confirmation

that I was on the right path. Here I was for the first time in my life, developing within the context of a supportive group and a university diploma, my sensitivity to the particularities of place and person.

We master's students divided into groups of two or three and entered the gardens. Armed with a set of simple questions, we set off to gather an initial impression of people's reactions to the gardens and to practice our interviewing techniques. An hour later, we returned to discuss the experience and our interviewees' responses. Different groups had spontaneously chosen different parts of the garden, some in the lower gardens, with their typically French classical design and statuary; others in the upper gardens, landscaped in the English style, with shrubbery, alleys and lawns.

We sensed a difference in people's responses to the different characters of the gardens' two halves. The lower gardens had a more public face: People coming as a family, and the children learning to walk, to cycle or to roller skate. In contrast, the upper gardens accommodated people seeking privacy, sitting quietly, reading a book, or reflecting on things.

I was drawn to environmental psychology because of psychologist Stephen Kaplan's work on the restorative benefits of nature (e.g., Kaplan 1995). He described how modern work involves a great deal of directed attention and that this faculty becomes easily fatigued. He highlighted the fascination of natural places—that they attract our attention without our having to direct it and so help our capacity for directed attention to recover.

In addition to fascination, Kaplan went on to enumerate three other qualities of natural places contributing to restorativeness. First, it is important that a place offers a refuge, an opportunity to get away. This can be as much in a figurative as a physical sense in that the place provides experiencers with an occasion to step back from what they are involved in and to clear their heads. Second, a place must have a sufficient extent and coherence to provide “a whole other world,” into which one can be engaged and absorbed. Third, the place must be compatible with the activities we would wish to carry out and allow one to pursue them simply and straightforwardly.



Environmental psychologist Kalevi Korpela’s work on the restorative qualities of favorite places awakened me to the idea of place identity—i.e., the role that places play in the maintenance of one’s sense of self (Korpela and Hartig 1996). Researching the idea of identity processes in the psychological literature, I came to recognize the related duality of insideness and outsideness. Vignoles et al. (2006) speak of six identity processes or motives, falling into two groups. *Belonging*, *self-efficacy*, and *self-esteem* contribute to identity enactment, while *continuity*, *distinctiveness*, and *meaning* contribute to identity definition. The enactment of one’s identity is linked to expansion and outward activity—the expression of one’s identity in the social sphere. The definition of one’s identity is an inner involvement, bearing on one’s sense of the distinctive meaning of one’s life over his or her whole history.

I arranged a meeting with the director of the master’s program to start preparing my research project. Before enrolling, I had been reading the lecture notes she had published on the web, and I was delighted to find reference to Kaplan and to the special qualities of certain buildings, such as Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. As she and I talked, I brought forward some of my feelings and sensitivities. Her response surprised me. In so many words, she said:

“The theory of place attachment is based on the idea, akin to imprinting in birds, that experiences in a subject’s childhood retain

a strong influence on their environmental preferences throughout life. The theory of spatial determinism explains how a place may have an effect on a person, such as attention restoration. A study of a forest near Paris showed that the distance that picnickers walked between the car park and where they ate was a function of their level of education.”

Listening to these comments, I began to lose myself in a maze of theories, causal mechanisms, actions, reactions, and relations between abstract quantities. The original experience of the two faces of the gardens in Nîmes stayed with me, but my research project proposed to objectify that experience with all manner of quantitative scales and questionnaires.

Holding to the magic of the gardens, I saw a duality in the qualities of restorative places that Kaplan had identified. In offering an opportunity to get away from things and by fascinating us, we lose ourselves in a place and are able to recenter ourselves. In offering extent and compatibility, we have a place to explore, where we can engage in activities and expand out into the world again. In relation to the Nîmes gardens, it seemed to me that the upper face of the gardens encouraged users to turn inward toward the self, just as the lower face of the gardens encouraged users to turn outward toward the world (Liger 2001, pp. 63–64).

As I continued my garden research, I began to feel uncomfortable because I felt that I was betraying the phenomenon as observed. In my interviews, I had come across a group of teenagers who liked to hang out on benches at the bottom of the garden shaded by lime trees. These young people were seeking a private time and place to get away from things and to be among friends. This was more an inward-looking activity, even though they were in the part of the garden that was supposed to be associated with outward activity.

At the same time, the upper gardens—associated with an inward-looking nature—also contributed to outward-looking activity. This portion of the gardens incorporates a hill leading up to the Gallo-Roman watchtower, the *Tour Magne*. I recognized from my own ex-

perience that the hill provided a challenge to those wishing to engage in vigorous exercise—for example, running or briskly walking up to the tower and back.

In becoming more familiar with how visitors used the two portions of the gardens, I saw full well that people did not fall exclusively into wishing either private contemplation or public activity. Rather, many users sought out both modes of place experience, yet my research method required that I break the wholeness of the garden experiences into two separate parts that then could be correlated quantitatively. In other words, I was arbitrarily reducing the wholeness of the garden experiences into two separate parts via which I might locate a “counterfeit” wholeness arising from statistical correlation (Bortoft 1996, pp. 266–267).

In the end, my research project collapsed under the weight of its forced abstractions and unwieldy questionnaires and, with it, my master’s degree and daring career change. Three years later, however, I saw a call for papers on the personal experience of place, and I felt I was given permission to talk again of the gardens. The decisive moment, however, was the discovery of a new perspective that would bring my intuitions into focus.

Systematics & a Spatial Dyad

It was through *EAP* Editor David Seamon that I was first introduced to *systematics*, an interpretive method developed by the British philosopher J. G. Bennett (Bennett 1993). Systematics is based on an appreciation of the qualitative significance of number, where each number—representing a particular *system*—offers its own unique path for understanding the experience of a particular phenomenon. As Bennett (*ibid.*, p. 16) writes, “Systematics illustrates that a particular situation can be considered in terms of several different systems, depending on one’s viewpoint and understanding.” As *one-ness* and *monad*, a phenomenon can be understood as as unity in diversity; as *two-ness* and *dyad*, a complementarity of polar opposites; as *three-ness* and a *triad*, a relation of reciprocal impulses; as *four-ness* and a *tetrad*, as transforming activity; and so on.

As I studied Bennett’s systematics method, I was completely unprepared for his description of the dyadic nature of the home. He draws our attention (*ibid.*, pp. 24–25, p. 28) to the:

inescapable quality of home: its dual function as an inward and outward place. When we mention family, shelter, and comfort, we speak of the home’s power to gather and hold. But when we speak of hospitality or departure and return, we speak of the home’s powers to relate its dwellers to the larger world....

In one sense, it is the “place” into which we enter, but in another sense, it is our “place” from which we move into the world. These two meanings permeate the content of a home and point to its significance as a dyad: Some elements relate to the home as a place of concentration and personal identity, while other elements relate to the home as a place of expansion that joins its dwellers with the larger society....

In this way, we say that a home has two *natures*, whether they be described as inner and outer or private and public. These two natures do not divide the home into two parts. One cannot say, “This part belongs to the private nature, while this part belongs to the public nature.” This statement cannot be true, because if it were, we would have two things rather than one. The home would simply divide into two parts, each of which would then become a new thing in itself.

This dyadic duality of closed/open, inner/outer, and private/public related to what I had recognized in the interviews with garden users. The complementarity of “concentration and personal identity” and “expansion ... [into] larger society” was what I had sensed in Kaplan’s account of attention restoration and in Viñoles and colleagues’ identity processes.

Bennett’s interpretation of home suggested that the comfortableness that one feels in a restorative place comes from a complementarity of enfolding and enabling. On one hand, we feel sheltered, able to rest, to get away, to rediscover a sense of meaning in our lives, our distinctness, and our continuity. On the other hand, we are given a stepping-off point into the wider world; we can expand in activities of our choice; we feel proud in our sense of self-efficacy and belonging in the larger society.

Bennett’s interpretation helped me understand why my master’s project had failed. In my analytical approach, I wrongly separated the public and private natures of the gardens into two separate parts. It was as if, when visiting a human home as a space alien, I was struck by the private nature of the bedroom, and the public nature of the sitting room, and decided that these were two separate places with two separate functions that would attract different kinds of people. As Bennett (*ibid.*, p. 28) explains,

there is nothing whatever that is not concerned with [the home's] nature as a private place. At one moment, the door and chairs welcome guests but, at other moments, secure the home from the public world and contribute to a place of retreat. Yet there is also nothing in the private nature of the home that is not related to its other nature as a place that belongs to the world. Even the most protective parts of the home contribute to its ability to play a public role, particularly as these parts help renew family members and give them restored energies to face again the outside world.



In a flash, I saw a link to the themes that Seamon developed in his *Geography of the Lifeworld* (Seamon 1979), namely *movement*, *rest*, and *encounter*. A place invites us to both inward stability and outward movement. The balance between the two makes possible a deepening encounter with the place, where we become more attentive to and aware of its character. In a more authentic encounter, we move from habituality to openness. The terms “closed/open” and “inner/outer” are those of a *spatial dyad*. The terms aim to convey the nature of a place’s expression in space and the nature of its immediate invitations and disclosures to us.

Thanks to Bennett’s systematics, I have at last been able to tease out the intuition that we as a class had in relation to the garden interviews. To talk of shared intuition may seem strange, but that was what I witnessed when we students came back from our garden interviews. Fresh from our experience in the gardens, we compared notes and a pattern emerged, a collective seeing of structure. That is phenomenology: The phenomenon spoke directly to us, disclosed itself. This disclosure refused to be split into the personal and the collective, the subjective and the objective.

A Temporal Dyad

As I’ve pondered the Nîmes gardens from a systematics perspective, I’ve also come to realize a *temporal dyad* that complements the spatial dyad described above. In one of the garden interviews, a lady remarked that she had come to the gardens as a child, a mother, and a grandmother. In short, the gardens

played an important role in her family history (as they had in my wife’s). This set me reflecting on the importance of place for me and my family when I was growing up.

In 1966 before I was born, my family moved to Bath, England. With its gentle rolling hills, Georgian architecture, and soft, yellowish, local stone, Bath is a beautiful

town. My parents had come back to London after their years working abroad in Cyprus and Nigeria. They were only too happy to swap a capital city for a provincial town.

My memories mostly start from when we moved into a large Georgian terraced house in Widcombe, located not far from where the River Avon meets a canal. Completed in 1810, the 57 miles of this canal connect the Avon in Bath to the Kennet in Newbury (British Waterways 2011). The Avon runs west to Bristol, while the Kennet flows east where it joins the Thames on its way to London. Barges were thus able to travel the 87 miles from port to port.

The canal, left disused since the advent of the railways, naturally lent itself to leisure use. Barges were originally towed from a path, by man or horse. Once restored, the towpath provided a natural footpath at the water’s edge. To this day, the canal provides a pleasant setting for many different activities—boating, cycling, walking, and picnicking. Created before steam and the petrol engine, the canal retains a certain harmony with nature and indeed has become an important habitat for wildlife. The cast iron bridges and lock gates only add to the canal’s beauty.

As the canal runs through the town, it offers a pleasant alternative route from one place to another. It was constructed at a higher level than the center of Bath, so gives one that sense of being away, allowing one to gain a fresh perspective on things. There is much to draw the eye: the slow movement of the water, the occasional barge passing through a lock, the reeds and waterside trees, the different stretches of water, of all different shapes and sizes, not to mention the wildlife—mallard, swans, moorhens, seagulls and the occasional heron.

Even before I was born, the Bath waterways had become an integral part of my family's daily routines. Walking home from primary school, I had the choice to take either the river or the canal home. My secondary school was not far from Sydney Gardens, the public gardens constructed over the canal. My father's work was a little farther on, so for many years we started our day walking together by the waterside on the way to our duties.

Running for miles, the canal offers a rich extent to explore, a diversity of habitats, and lends itself to trials of endurance. When we moved to Bathampton, I challenged myself first to walk all the way to Limpley Stoke, and later, as far as Avoncliff and back. With each new destination achieved, I embraced with confidence new territories of my inner landscape. It is clear that the canal is a restorative place. In its complementarity of public and private, enabling and enclosing natures, we see again the terms of the spatial dyad. It is not surprising, therefore, that we were drawn into a deep encounter with the place as a family, during the time of our 30-year association with Bath.

Let me recount some memories of the canal that became woven into my personal and family history. For instance, there was one stretch of water along the canal where we regularly watched tufted ducks diving. One day I was surprised and delighted to see that they were joined by goldeneyes. Another time, I saw a strange bird I did not recognize, looking like a duck, but perching in a tree. My sister sketched it, noting its particularities, so we could later identify it at home. I regularly saw black-headed gulls on the canal, their plumage changing from summer to winter. In summer, their heads were a lovely chocolate brown (not black, as their name would suggest!). In winter, they had just a dark spot next to the eye. One time, I saw 50 in one stretch of water. My mother said there must have been a storm at sea that day.

There were other changes related to the seasons—for instance, the male mallards emerging in spring from their dusky eclipse into their bright breeding plumage, soon to be followed by ducklings. Moorhens created their untidy stick-and-leaf nests and tended their eggs, from which their scraggly young would hatch.

There was one particular spot where, year after year, my father and I saw a swan nesting and raising her cygnets. My father was upset when the owner of the nearby house began tending the grass as his own, and the swan and her cygnets disappeared. We had some harsh winters as I was growing up, particularly in 1982. In those times, the canal would freeze over. With my sisters, we laughed to see ducks coming into land and slipping and sliding on the ice.

When my parents left Bath, one of my sisters gave my mother a watercolor of one of the cast iron bridges across the canal. For me, this painting summed up the canal and, with it, the whole of Bath. As proof of what the canal meant to her, my mother hung the painting next to one representing Cyprus, the place that had most touched her heart in her life overseas.

As this account suggests, our memories refer, on one hand, to *stability*: to the unchanging landscape, the predictable rhythm of the seasons, the recurrent changes in the plumage of birds, the arrival of mating season, nest making, rearing of young, and, finally, the turn to winter. On the other hand, our memories refer to *unusual events* punctuating the natural equilibrium: to the arrival of a less-often-seen species, a sudden abundance of another, a particularly harsh winter, the amusing behavior of ducks landing on ice. Sometimes, these unusual events rupture the previous stability and upset the recurrence of a happy event as when the homeowner annexed the grassy bank that had been the swan's nesting place.

Here, I believe we have a *temporal dyad*, with a complementary tension between *stable recurrence* and *singular occurrence*. In other words, shared memories of a place incorporate a combination of "that always used to happen" plus "remember that time when...?" This combination of repetitive and unusual events powerfully contributes to the memory of a place.

The Mundane and the Festive

The upper gardens in Nîmes are arranged so that the walker climbing up one of the multitude of paths arrives at a number of plateaux on his way to the *Tour Magne*. Each plateau provides a contrast with the narrow paths and offers visitors a chance to admire the view of the town below. On one of these plateaux is a beautiful pond adorned with water lilies and koi carp and fed by water

trickling into it from above. This was one of favorite garden spots where, along with many local children, I enjoyed the game of spotting frogs hiding among the reeds and lilies. When we first moved to Nîmes, I came to the gardens almost every day. In spring and summer, the pause by the pond became part of my daily routine.

After I started the master's program in environmental psychology, I still returned to the pond. One day I had a surprise. Two snakes emerged from reeds on the far bank and glided over each other before slipping back into the water. I was amazed. Never before had I seen water snakes there. For me, they were a rarity and here they were slithering in shimmering silver right before my eyes.

I could simply cite this experience as another example of an unusual occurrence standing out against a stable background of recurrence. But the experience had an additional quality that points to its richer significance. I felt honored that the gardens had offered me the gift of seeing the water snakes. I felt special, with a renewed sense of my personal being. The gardens had spoken to me! Here was a moment of standing back, of wonder, of celebration. To use the terms of phenomenological psychologist Bernd Jager, my experience had crossed the threshold from *the mundane to the festive*.

Jager (1997) described the mundane and the festive as two complementary qualities of experience that he first recognized in the rural Holland of his childhood. He observed that, on the day of rest from work, his father joined the local farmers as they returned to their fields to survey, to discuss, and to enjoy their lands. He noticed their very gestures changed, their posture, even their dialect. He could never quite believe the conventional explanations he was given of the necessity of this day of rest—to recharge and to return rested and refreshed to the fields. These explanations seemed to imply that rest was simply a reduction of the quantity of work and would allow the body, as with a machine, to recover its capabilities. Jager sensed that there was a deeper reason. He related how Sunday was different *experientially* from the regular workdays of the week.

For a more appropriate explanation, Jager turned to the biblical account of Creation in Genesis. At the end of each day of Creation, there is a pause: "And

God saw that it was good." This phrasing marks a threshold between the day of work and the moment of standing back and celebrating that work. The Sabbath then becomes the completion of these moments, marking off the time of ordinary work from a time of contemplation and rejoicing.

Even if people are charged with the duty of mundane work, as stewards of the land, it is in the festive that individuals come into their own. A baby feeds, but a child eats. Jager explained that weaning is the moment when the infant enters fully into the human community. Feeding is simply the mechanical act of eating; the chewing, digesting, and assimilating is the very essence of the transformation of nature that takes place during mundane work. When the weaned child is invited to take part in eating, there is a shift to grace and ceremony, attention to others, and conversation. In experiencing a meal, a host prepares and the guests share, each welcomed and celebrated as a unique person. In turn, the infant's sucking becomes the child's speaking; and the infant's grasping, the child's greeting.

The festive does not seek to remove the mundane but infuses it with deeper meaning. The manual and mental dexterity that allows us to "come to grips" with the quotidian world, shaping it to our needs, is balanced with the sense of the festive that respects and cherishes the world (Jager 1997, pp. 13–14, p. 15). The modern world, however, seeks to abolish the festive and absorb it into the mundane world of science and technology: "Eating becomes fueling a biochemical organism, sexuality becomes an exchange of bodily fluids, host and guest relations become a mask for what in reality are power relations that grow out of the biological need to survive" (ibid., p. 7).

In mundane terms, the Nîmes gardens were simply a stable background—a place that accompanied me in my daily activities. In the moment of revelation, when I saw the water snakes, I felt suddenly that I was the gardens' guest and they my host. In this festive moment, the gardens made themselves known to me personally. I felt renewed in my sense of personal being. It is only from the threshold of the festive that persons and things appear as actively manifesting themselves. No aspect of reality comes fully into its own until it has been greeted, contemplated and blessed; until it has been given the space and time to fully appear and be present (ibid., p. 12).

As the spatial character of natural surroundings is restorative for human beings, so is their temporal character. The structure of quotidian and unusual events leads to an experience of the festive, where place and person come into their own. The fact that certain species of plants and animals are common and others rare adds to the temporal fabric, where certain species will be more regularly seen than others. Environmental activist George Monbiot (2013) criticizes conservation efforts that attempt to make rare species common. We can see in such efforts the spread of the mundane. The common is more readily assimilated to the mundane, but the rare remains wild, aloof. In the mundane, everything is to be tamed. Nothing is wild, nothing is “other.” In the festive, distinctions are celebrated. Self and other are each appreciated as different and in that difference seen as giving value to each other.

Jager makes clear that our desire for inhabitation, which I felt so strongly in Nîmes, can only be fulfilled by being open to this dimension of the festive:

It is ultimately by virtue of this festive light that we feel invigorated in our desire to inhabit the earth, and that it becomes possible for us to feel truly at home in the world. It is this light of the festive that gives a unique presence to whatever it illuminates. It is what makes a particular landscape unforgettable and irreplaceable. We may long for a garden, a house, a landscape of our youth, the same way that we long for a person we once knew and loved, because both once welcomed us, and both made their appearance within the light of the festive. By opening the register of the personal, the festive makes it possible for us to recognize a landscape as we would an old friend, it permits us to experience trees as offering us their shade, as paths inviting us to explore the hills, or cool streams as bidding us to take a rest at the water's edge (ibid., p. 36).

The Mundane & Festive as Renewal

Bennett's systematics is an interpretive method that aims to be true to the richness of the phenomenon as it discloses itself as a sequence of systems each characterized by a different number—oneness, twoness, threeness, and so forth. In this essay, I have suggested how a systematic understanding of the dyad helped me to understand my intuitions concerning my favorite places. The spatial character of a place—its open and closed areas, its inner and outer qualities—contributes to its restorativeness. The temporal character of place—a relatively stable background of recurrent situations punctuated by singular events—provides

the basis for an experience of the mundane and the festive, which leads to a renewal of personal identity. A favorite place, in other words, facilitates a restoration of one's identity.

These spatial and temporal dyads were both contained in the initial experience of the Nîmes gardens, shared with my fellow students, in that first interviewing exercise. The spatial character of the gardens was revealed via the different responses that participants gave depending on whether they were queried in the lower or the upper gardens. The temporal character of the gardens was intimated via the lady who described how she had come to the gardens as child, mother, and grandmother. The two dyads were both present in one place, on one morning. This was, to quote Goethe, “an instance worth a thousand, bearing all within itself” (Bortoft, 1998, p. 292).

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Photographs of Les Jardins de la Fontaine, Nîmes, France:

p. 11, *The upper gardens; wooded alleys create a sense of intimacy and enclosure. Photograph by Ian Biggar and used with permission; available at: <http://motorhometripphotos.blogspot.com>.*

p. 13: *The lower gardens; the classical features of balustrades, statuary, and grand staircase create an open space of spectacle and display. Photograph by Olivier Accart; available at the Wikimedia Commons: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nimes,_Jardins_de_la_Fontaine_4.jpg.*