

From space and (non-)place to place attachment and sense of place

An exploration of the role of imagination as the key to transform spaces into places children and youngsters feel attached to

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Abstract

In our research¹ we focus on the physical and architectural characteristics of a location, and the possible ways to furnish and/or decorate a space to address learners' imaginative power, a precondition to satisfy their (presupposed) spiritual hunger and longings for a better world. The core concepts 'space', 'non-place' and 'place', 'place attachment' and 'sense of place' are central in our research. Pupils reflected upon safe and unpleasant places in school and wrote down their stories. As such pupils enable us to perceive the world through the eyes of a child and listen to the voice of the child. Preliminary findings of the analysis of the pupils' texts show a central place for friends and teacher(s) in their 'place attachment' and 'sense of place'. We read in pupils' comments that in the (decorative) architecture of a classroom the personal touch of the teacher is pivotal. Remarkably, even now, focusing on physical aspects of the classroom nevertheless it depends on the person of the teacher.

¹ The research we report about is part of a larger three years project 'Samen leven doe je zelf' ('Living together, just do it!') (Ter Avest, Commissaris and Bakker 2014).

Introduction

We start with a description of the location of the three participating primary schools and refer in short to the project of which this research on ‘Living together, just do it!’ is part of.² Special attention is paid to the relation between a building, located at a specific place, and wellbeing. In the second paragraph we elaborate on the concepts ‘space’, ‘non-place’, ‘place’, and ‘place attachment’ and ‘sense of place’. We present in the third paragraph the research method and the data of our research constructed by 35 pupils age 10-11. The last paragraph is for conclusions and recommendations.

1. Location – three primary schools in the Bijlmer district in Amsterdam

In 2000, due to renovations in the neighbourhood the three participating schools had to leave their temporary buildings. Challenged by the need for new housing the developments for collaboration between the three schools were accelerated about fifteen years ago. Planners, architects and educationalists joined forces and added two new ‘wings’ to the building of the ‘Bijlmerhorst’ safeguarding the distinguished own school identity of each of the three schools (the *neutral* state school ‘Bijlmerhorst’, the *Islamic* school ‘As Soeffah’ and the *secular-christian* school ‘Polstok’).³ The three ‘wings’ are connected with each other by a central hall, an open space that mere by its location does open up for ‘things to happen’.⁴

The aim of the research project ‘Living together, just do it’ is to strengthen the relationship between teachers and parents, being ‘partners in education’ and as such create social cohesion amongst the schools’ primary stakeholders. The child’s perspective is central in this project. Parents and teachers, first separately, then together are expected to have conversations about

² The first piloting year (2014-2015) of this project is funded by the municipality of Amsterdam as part of their policy and subsequent activities on anti-radicalization.

³ Avest, I. ter (2012). *The plural of togetherness is future*, poster presentation at the REA conferentie, Atlanta, 2-4 November 2012.

⁴ Ipgrave, J. (2015).

the meaning of children's perspectives and create feelings of bonding with regard to a shared pedagogical strategy - recognizing, respecting and bridging differences.

2. Theoretical framework

According to Augé⁵ we are 'now placed in the invidious position of promulgating the individual as source and guarantor of all meaning production' (Augé, in Buchanan 1999, p. 396)⁶. Augé states that the difference between a non-place and a place is of being observed in a role (passenger at the airport, customer in the mall) or being approached as a person subsequently resulting in a personal relationship with that specific place – which then by consequence becomes a meaningful place. Augé states that 'a person entering the space of non-place is relieved of his usual determinants. He becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer or driver. Perhaps he is still weighed down by the previous day's worries, the next day's concerns; but he is distanced from them temporarily by the environment of the moment' (Auge 1995, p. 103). A non-place offers 'the passive joys of identity-loss, and the more active pleasure of role-playing.' (ibid., p. 103). 'Frequentation of non-places today provides an experience of solitary individuality' that is not experienced in full and not reflected upon since it offers, according to Augé, a substitute for human interaction. What is needed, according to Buchanan reviewing the work of Auge, to transform a space into a place is 'a mode of behavior attributable to a type of space' (Buchanan 1999, p. 395), recognizable habitual or ritual behavior as an invitation to become part of and relate to that space, as such transforming the space into a meaningful place – a place to feel at home, that is to feel safe. We follow Buchanan in the question he formulates and that we will give a preliminary answer in this contribution: 'To what extent is the experience of a space tied directly to the objective conditions of that space?' (Buchanan p. 397). To answer this question we first turn to the German-American philosopher Hannah Arendt who points to the need of reflection.

⁵ Augé, M. (1995). *Non-places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Translated by J. Howe. London/New York: Verso.

⁶ Buchanan, I. (1999). Non-Places: Space in the Age of Supermodernity. *Social Semiotics*, vol. 9, no. 3. Review Article.

A central theme in Arendt's work is 'thinking' as a weapon against the 'banality of evil'⁷. According to Arendt imagination is needed in thinking; thinking as a kind of internal dialogue to arrive at coherence between experiences and make them meaningful.⁸. Whereas Arendt focusses on 'thinking', the cognitive reflective process turning non-places into places, the social geographer Gert-Jan Hospers in his publication on 'Geography and emotions; how we interact with (non-)places'⁹ articulates the emotional effect of the environment on meaning-giving and accordingly people's well-being.

For our thinking about processes in the transformation from non-place to place and 'place attachment' and 'sense of place' we are inspired by De Botton's work 'The Architecture of Happiness'¹⁰. De Botton takes as his starting point a multiple self, consisting of a variety of 'personalities', each of them being evoked in different contexts. Whether and how we get to know our selves is dependent of (the architecture of) the environment we are in – an environment that can be characterized by its size (e.g. of a room), its view (of a window), its colours (e.g. of the sky and the clouds; shades of the sun), and its smells (e.g. of flowers). Who we are and how we present one of our selves is related to the context we are in and the images, associations and memories such a context evokes¹¹. The other way around the architecture can also help to keep certain qualities in mind and to keep certain memories vivid.

The concept 'sense of place' then is central in our research and used to describe the feelings of a person; the concept of 'place attachment' is introduced to describe the experiences of a person - be it positive or negative – in the context he or she lives in. Also the experience of pleasant or negative memories coming into mind in a certain context, is part of research of the field of *topophilia*. According to Tuan the field of *topophilia* is closely related to the field of *geosophy*, the field of 'the study of geography from different points of view, including geographical ideas,

⁷ Borren, M. (2008). Arendt en Derrida over vriendschap en het probleem van politieke gemeenschap [Arendt and Derrida on friendship and the problem in political relationships]. In: *Hannah Arendt Cahier*. Radboud Universiteit. Budel: Damon.

⁸ Arendt, H. (2013). Denken [Thinking].

⁹ Hospers, G.-J. (2014). *Geografie en gevoel: wat plekken met ons doen* [Geography of emotions: the influence of places on our wellbeing]. Koninklijke Van Gorcum.

¹⁰ De Botton, A. (2006). *De architectuur van het geluk* [The Architecture of Happiness]. Olympus, Uitgeverij Atlas Contact.

¹¹ See Hospers (2014, p. 28) and de Boton (2006, p. 28, p. 119).

be they right or wrong, from different people - not only geographers, but also farmers, fishermen, business people and poets, novelists and painters, Beduins and Hottentotters - and by consequence for the greater part this field is about subjective meanings¹²

We follow Buchanan in our research question: what are the characteristics of a particular space in school that opens up to become a meaningful place for a pupil characterized as 'place attachment' and a 'sense of place'?

3. Research method, presentation of data and preliminary results of data-analysis

In our qualitative research we focus on the affective relations of pupils of the three Bijlmer schools. Three groups of pupils (one group of the *Bijlmerhorst* and two groups of the *Polstok*¹³ aged 10-11; N= 35) were invited to reflect upon safe and unpleasant places in the school, and to write down their stories.¹⁴ Answering questions like 'How come that you choose this place?' 'What did you experience?' 'How did this all feel?' Next to that they were invited to show the place they wrote about to the researcher, and at that place tell their story. This 'visit' to the place is videotaped.

Pupils' written stories are analysed according to the theoretical concepts of 'place attachment' and 'sense of place'. These key concepts are the lenses through which we look at pupils' stories.

3.a Presentation of data

Children pointed to very *different located spaces*, and the experiences and feelings that accompany that turn that space into a place, like:

¹² Tuan, in: Hospers 2014.

¹³ For different reasons, a.o. due to a visit of the Inspectorate, the pupils of the *As Soeffah* school could not participate in the research.

¹⁴ Jonker, S. (2015). *Mag ik jou wat antwoorden; verslag van activiteiten met leerlingen van groep 6 van basisschool 'de Polsstok'* [Let me give you an answer; report of activities with 6th grade pupils of primary school 'de Polsstok']. Amsterdam: Zina/Female Economy/Utrechtse Adviesgroep.

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*the space where pupils have their gymnastic lessons ('.. there I am allowed to jump and dance, and jump my sorrows away');

*one specific classroom, for example the classroom of grade 1 and 2 ('... there I got my first friends, and the teacher was very kind'), the classroom of grade 4 ('... I fell in love with a girl for the first time'), or the classroom of grade 2 ('... I got very angry and I kicked the door, I just did it, I don't know why');

*the room of the school's psychologist (*Interne Begeleider* – school psychologist), because this pupil in that specific space feels free to talk with the school's pastor (*Identiteits Begeleider* – school pastor) about his father who passed away;

*some pupils state that the space of the school in general is liked as a place, because 'in school I can ask questions; at school they don't think you are rude when you ask questions.'

Different *emotions* are evoked sometimes in the same space or with the same teacher, for example

*the room where children change their cloths for their gymnastic-lessons 'It's a nice place, because it *smells good* in that room'. The *bad smell* in the boys's bathroom for an other pupil is the reason to point that space as an ugly place to be: 'The place stinks, that's why I pee there within three seconds, keeping my nose closed with my fingers';

Many of the children point to a specific (class) room and recall memories of the teacher, and in particular of classmates and friends, and the feelings that accompany these memories. Sometimes a liked place evokes a mixture of memories:

*A girl says: 'This is the tree were I played with friends when I was a little child. I feel good when I recall these memories. Over there the teacher's goldfish was burried; this fish was in our classroom in grade 6. For me this is a precious memory, and it's also a very old tree. I like to be here, because all those memories then come to my mind.'

3b. Preliminary results and reflection

Reflections of the child that accompany the choice for a liked place gives information about what a child recognizes in her or his own feelings, or lacks in her or his own (family) environment (De Botton 2006, p. 176).

In some stories we may read in between the lines a strong desire, for example the boy pointing to the room where he can talk with the school pastor about the death of his father. One might say that this boy longs for his father, and the school pastor gave him words for his father's presence in speech, well aware of the father's absence in real life.

Such a longing can also be read in the story of the child who likes to do gymnastics because 'I can jump my sorrows away.' 'Jumping sorrows away' possibly points to a kind of domestic violence – gymnastics to a kind of coping strategy.

With regard to the architecture of the space, in order to make it possible that 'something can happen' not very often pupils' narratives give specific and articulated information about decorative aspects as openings for 'something to happen'. When talking about the gymnastics a relation may be established with the interior design as inviting for 'jumping away sorrows', like the posters of the decorative architecture presented below invited students to have conversations about metaphoric lines or songs chosen by students of the previous class RE. Also the condition of the bathrooms can be seen as giving room for 'something to happen', in this case something unpleasant like being locked up. It seems that in the associations with experiences pupils narrate about, other people – be it the teacher or classmates - come to the foreground; the decorative architecture most of the time staying in the unconscious background.

An interesting example with regard to the effect of 'decorative architecture' of a classroom is given by De Pater writing about Religious Education (RE) with students in a secondary school.¹⁵ The teacher, like an interior designer, decorates her classroom with originals of texts of her students. Students were invited to select from a favourite pop song one metaphoric line and write that line down on a poster, in their own handwriting – clear and readable for others. If necessary they are asked to translate that sentence in Dutch. The students put up the posters in the classroom, resulting in a decorated classroom with an ambience determined by subjectivity. Students of the next class entering the room do know what to expect of an RE class, however upon entering this decorated space they don't know yet what might happen within the familiar framework of an RE class - the class as a non-place where students know and take up their role as learners, sit down, open their books to acquire knowledge about religion(s). Entering this decorated classroom they can not but read the handwritten texts, being

¹⁵ De Pater, J. (2015). Het boekje met de honderd vragen. In gesprek met Rachele Tahapary over het creëren van tijd en ruimte. *Narthex*, jaargang 15, nr. 1, maart. p. 62-69.

touched by the subjective and sometimes intimate expressions of their schoolmates and in a natural and informal way it triggers their imagination and produces associations upon which they reflect, be it in an internal dialogue or thinking aloud with their classmates.

In their publication ‘Neural consequences of environmental enrichment’ Van Praag *et al.* report about their research on this topic; ‘enriched environment’ they see in comparison with a standard context, paired with a voluntary opportunity to interact with this enriched environment.¹⁶ In our example above the decorative architecture is an enrichment in comparison with a normal classroom, paired with the natural and informal invitation of the posters to interact with the handwritten metaphoric song lines, commented upon by their schoolmates. The consequences of the interaction in the enriched environment ‘enhances the memory function in various learning tasks’ and ‘the degree of learning improvement might be greater following enrichment that includes exercise than exercise alone’.¹⁷

Generally speaking it seems that for pupils in primary school age that the process of transformation of a space into a meaningful and safe place is dominated by a relation with persons – be it the teacher and/or the classmates. For students in secondary school age the interior design seems to play a more explicit role.

4. Concluding remarks and recommendations

From the data we conclude that we should not neglect the interaction with the personality of a teacher and her or his qualities to take the role of an interior designer and construct an environment that triggers imagination and allows for ‘something to happen’, at the same time inviting pupils to reflect upon the ‘something’ – cognitively as well as affectively.¹⁸

To give room, and to change space into a meaningful place it would be nice to have ‘a dictionary connecting architecture and expressions of interior design to feelings and emotions’.¹⁹ DE

¹⁶ Van Praag, H., G. Kempermann, F.H. Gage (2000). Neural Consequences of Environmental Enrichment. *Nature Reviews/Neuro Science*, p. 191-198.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 193

¹⁸ Zondervan, T. and J.-M. Praamsma (2015). Leren voor het leven. *Narthex*, jaargang 15, nr. 1. p. 85-89.

¹⁹ De Botton, p. 109

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Bijlmer Schools and its classroom(s), designed as open spaces and turned into places by way of decorative architecture and shared habits and rituals, places full of reflected memories, turn into places of attachment where the child relates to and gets to know who he or she is - not in the role of a mere learner, but as a unique person.

Since learning takes place not only in school (in formal learning) but also in the family, the sportsclub, and the neighborhood (informal learning) we recommend to start conversations with parents, sport leaders and people living in the neighborhood about the pedagogical strategies (including decorative architecture) needed for the Bildung of the child.