

The Role of Time in the Formation of Different Levels of Meanings Regarding the Concept of Place

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ABSTRACT

The meaning of place is one of the important concepts that has recently received much attention in the fields of architecture and urban planning. The purpose of this study was to provide a new interpretation of different levels regarding the meaning of place based on the role of time factor. Our case study was the Sofeh Mountain Park located in Isfahan. It is an urban public place where different people can attend with a variety of motivations. This study classified different meanings formed in the minds of the park visitors, based on three indexes including “frequency of visits”, “duration of presence”, and “motivation of individuals”. The statistical population of the study included 150 people from different social strata visiting this park. Data were collected through a questionnaire with open- and close-ended questions. Data were analyzed qualitatively and all questionnaires and case interviews were coded separately using content analysis method, and thereby different levels of meaning were extracted based on each visitor’s view. Results indicated that the time or duration of the person’s familiarity with the place was an important factor in the formation of different semantic levels in relation to the place. In the first encounter with the place, therefore, one only perceives the physical and skeletal aspects of the environment. With increasing times of visits and presence in the place, one becomes more interested in the place. At such a level, people interpret the place according to their own feelings, interests, and memories. The third and deepest level of meaning in individuals is a sense of place identity, which is achieved by increasing the length of time of people’s presence in the place. At such a level, the motivation for people to attend the place goes beyond the beauty and their individual feelings and interests, and their perception of the place becomes a transpersonal recognition on an urban scale.

Keywords: Time, Meaning of Place, Instrumental Meanings, Place Attachment, Place Identity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

To investigate the relationship between man and the environment, it is important to understand meanings and the emerging messages in addition to the physical elements and sensory properties of the environment. The environment is best perceived when the emerging meanings and concepts, as well as various perceptions of the actors are examined alongside examining the physical elements (Falihat & Noohi, 2012, P. 320). The mental states of individuals in the place and human memories of different places are important factors in the way people perceive the meanings of different places. Thus, by understanding different meanings that people perceive in different environments, one can achieve the structure of environments with better quality. In this regard, it is of paramount importance to understand different meanings, the mechanisms of their formation, and factors influencing the quality of these meanings.

The present study sought to investigate the role of time factor on the formation of different levels of meanings of a place. By presenting different definitions of the meanings of a place, different levels of the meanings of a place have been explained and categorized from various theorists' views in the literature review section. Then, different meanings that individuals have in mind from a particular place have been extracted in the process of this case study. Next, every meaning cited by each visitor has been categorized individually in the table of meaning levels. Finally, data obtained for each individual have been analyzed in relation to the variables of "frequency of visits", "duration of presence", and "motivation to attend".

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

There has not been much Iranian research on the meaning of a place and its constituent factors in different places. However, Heidari measured and evaluated different meanings in these two patterns of residence (Ph.D. dissertation: *Evaluating the Meaning of Place in Apartment and Independent Courtyard Complexes*, 2014). The place of meaning in the process of forming sense of place was examined by pointing to the "component of meaning" as the factor that can lead to the formation of deeper levels of sense of a place in man (Kalali & Managing, 2013). In international research, various definitions and perspectives have been presented about place and its meaning, of which two phenomenological and positive approaches can be mentioned in a general classification. In their

interpretations, phenomenologists refer to an inner sense of place as opposed to externality (Norberg-Schulz, 1993). The contrast of the inner realm of the place to its outer realm is defined as the equivalent to the terms objective and subjective. Accordingly, phenomenologists have defined place as having two mental (inner) and objective (outer) dimensions. The objective dimension of the place represents the skeletal and physical characteristics of the place. However, the subjective dimension of the place means the deep and inner feelings of an individual toward the spirit governing the place (Tuan, 1977), which often is referred to as sense of a place, as well. This sense is a self-consciousness state of meaning creation through the formation of dependence on physical location (Partovi, 2009). Accordingly, it can be assumed that in the phenomenological approach, one's feelings about the atmosphere governing an environment or, in other words, the governing spirit, are known as the meaning of place (Gustafson, 2001). The positivist approach, especially in the field of environmental psychology, has dealt with different aspects of one's interaction with the environment, especially with regard to how one perceives that environment. What is known as the meaning of place in this approach is somehow one's mental imagination of that place (Lynch, 1981). In some cases, these imaginations can be positive or negative (Manzo, 2005). Such imaginations are influenced by various factors, including environmental and human factors. Environmental factors include various spatial characteristics of the environment, especially its formal and functional structures, meaning that the environment has affordances that one perceives depending on their motivations and needs and conceives different meanings in their minds thereof (Motalebi, 2007). The human factors themselves are divided into two individual and social dimensions, of which the former includes one's accepted culture and values as well as their demographic characteristics including age, gender, education level and so on affecting his or her perception of that place (Meesters, 2009). The social dimensions of meaning include one's interactions and social relationships with other people leading to the formation of memories, sense of belonging, and ultimately identification of that place. Meaning in architecture appears in a variety of spectra, with different levels suggested in various studies. Table 1 provides a summary of this classification (Gustafson, 2001). In architecture, meaning appears in a variety of aspects which in different research, distinct levels have been considered for it. Table 2 provides a summary of this classification (Motalebi, 1996).

Table 1. Different Levels of Meaning from the Perspective of Different Theorists

	Gibson (1950)	Langer (1953)	Binford (1962)	Bourdieu (1974)	Nasr (1981)	Nohl (1988)	Rapoport (1982)
Level 1	Primary and objective meaning, Functional meaning, Instrumental meaning	Signs	Instrumental	Basic level (perceptual)	Physical	Perceptual	Instrumental level (lower level)

Level 2	Emotional and valuable meaning	Symptoms	Social		Mental	Symptoms	Social level (middle level)
Level 3	Symbolic meaning, Symptom meaning	Symbols	Symbolic	Secondary level (symbolic)	Spiritual	Symbolic	Ontological level (higher level)

(Motalebi, 1996)

2.1. Instrumental Meanings of Place

Based on their thoughts and expectations, humans have different judgments and emotions in the face of place and attend differently therein, which can be examined in the context of cognitive, emotional, and functional interactions (Hashemnezhad, Yazdanfar, Heidari, & Behdadfar, 2013). In this respect, when one first arrives at a place, he obviously would not have a particular perception and sense to that place. To describe the place, one only suffices to the physical aspects and what is observed at first glance. This type of communication is the most superficial type of human connection to a place that, according to Relph, one at this level is only aware of one's presence in one place with its specific characteristics (Relph, 1976). If the place has features or subjects of interest to the individual, then one will have an incentive for re-attendance. Therefore, meanings formed at this level for the individual are also relevant to their physiological needs.

2.2. Place Attachment

The concept of attachment to place expresses the positive and emotional relationship between an individual and place that results in the formation of a symbolic relationship between the two, which is the basis of the group or individual's perception of the place and forms their interrelationships (Altman & Low, 1992). This place's attraction provides the motivation for human presence in place and is a factor to spend time therein (Sajadzadeh, 2014). While creating a sense of belonging and meaning in one's life (Tuan, 1977), this dimension leads to the formation of responsive and committed behaviors towards the place and can also promote environmental behaviors (Vaske & Kobrin, 2001). The strongest type of belonging to a place is rooted in the place. People who are alien to the place are not very satisfied about it and may have trouble in the process of identity formation (Pirbabaii & Sajadzadeh, 2012). Accordingly, attachment to a place is a level of one's relation to the place during which one becomes deeply connected with that place emotionally and the place holds special meanings for that person. These meanings come from a variety of factors, including the place history, one's memories

of that place, the particular events that have happened there, and so on.

2.3. Place Identity

Place identity is a part of human's existential identity that is formed in the dual relationship of man and place. Studies by environmental behaviorists have shown that place identity influences the formation of one's identity. In other words, place identity is a dimension of the 'self' that defines one's personal identity in relation to place both consciously and unconsciously based on one's beliefs, preferences, feelings, values, goals, and behavioral attitudes (Lewicka, 2008). While being dependent on individual, one's particular experiences and socialization, place identity reflects the individuals and groups living in that particular place (Proshansky, 1978). Relph has explained the types of place identity based on his conceptions of in and out. He argued that being inside a place is equivalent to the place's identity formation and considered this to be much stronger than attachment to a place (Relph, 2007, p. 120).

From the discussion of place identity, it can be inferred that place identity is far beyond the mere sense of being in one place or personal feelings of that place. In such a case, one reaches such a depth of meaning that searches for one's identity in place identity. Thus, the innermost level of one's communication with place is created when they feel identity about that place and consider it as a part of themselves. In such a case, one will not withhold and would be dedicated for that place (Shamai, 1991).

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of time in the formation of different levels of the meanings of a place. Therefore, based on the concepts stated in relation to the levels of meaning, this study attempted to explain a new reading of place's meaning levels. Accordingly, it has defined the three meaning levels of the environment, including "instrumental meanings of place", "place attachment", and "identity formation to place". These three levels are equivalent to three primary, intermediate, and transcendental levels presented in the literature (Fig. 1).

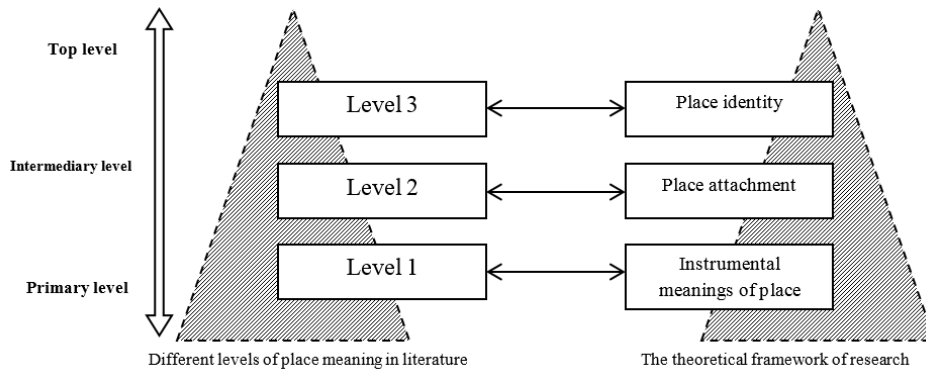


Fig. 1. Adaptation of the Theoretical Framework to Previous Research on the Levels of Meaning

4. METHODOLOGY

As discussed earlier, the present study sought to classify different levels of place's meanings with an emphasis on the role of time factor. Therefore, the research was qualitatively designed and different meanings that people perceive in the case study were extracted and classified into three levels designed in the theoretical framework. Data were collected through a questionnaire consisting of ten open- and close-ended questions, which included the following four types:

1. Duration of one's acquaintance and presence in place: To evaluate the time variable, questions were asked to evaluate the duration of one's acquaintance with the desired place, the number of visits to that place during the month and year, and finally the length of time one spends at each time.

2. The acquaintance level of people with this place: In these questions, the person is asked to name the number of specific places from the complex in question. These questions are asked to measure one's attention to specific locations in the park and to extract their degrees of importance for them.

3. Motivation and reasons for one's attendance in place: This question is asked to examine different motivations for coming to the place. Another question asked people in this area is that how much they prefer to come to this place than other similar places.

4. Different meanings of place for specific person: In this section, the questions seek to extract the depth of one's feelings about the place in question and the meanings they have in mind.

Questionnaires were collected and analyzed individually using content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). A level of interaction with place was determined for each person according to the given answers.

The case study was chosen as an environment that could be used by a variety of people throughout the week. It also needed to provide a variety of opportunities to attract people with different motivations and attendance for long-term duration. Among urban public spaces, therefore, the Sofeh Mountain Park was selected as a mountainous park with an area over 100 hectares in the southwest of Isfahan city.



Fig. 2. Perspective of Sofeh Mountain Park
(<https://hamgardi.com>)



Fig. 3. Vegetation Variation of Sofeh Mountain Park
(<https://www.karnaval.ir>)

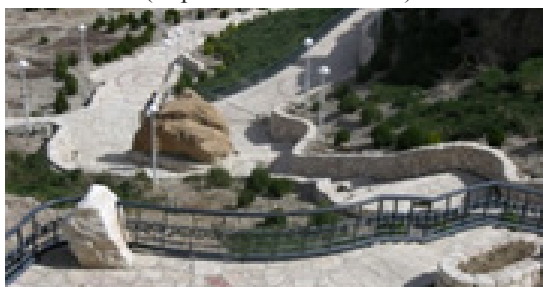


Fig. 4. The Main Mountaineering Pass of the Sofeh Mountain Park
(<https://www.karnaval.ir>)



Fig. 5. Landscaping in the Sofeh Mountain Park
(<https://www.imna.ir>)

The statistical population of the study included 150 individuals, whom were selected randomly from different groups of people using the park at different times. The entire population was selected from people who were in the park of Mount Sofeh and were engaged in recreation, mountaineering, and so on.

5. FINDINGS

After case-by-case analysis of 150 questionnaires, the respondents were categorized into three groups based on the duration of their interaction with the collection and the motivation for their presence as follows:

A. First Group

This group included people who spent little time in the Sofeh resort complex. Most of them knew this complex as one of the most beautiful places in Isfahan; however, when introducing their favorite places in the park, they mostly focused on the whole complex or very public places therein. They stated that the main motives for their presence in this place were its beauty, especially the green area and its topography, which was suitable for mountaineering. For example, a 32-year-old man stated about the park that:

“I come to the collection 4-5 times a year and spend between 1 and 3 hours at a time in here. I think this place is perfect for hiking. I love the path to the peak and the storage pond because it is a beautiful place. I enjoy the trees of this place and love the green area of this place for its beauty, but I don't have any specific historical-geographical information about this place.”

As mentioned, people in this group talk very generally about this place and mostly focus on natural beauty and its skeletal and physical features. The survey also included a number of people traveling in Isfahan. In all their conversations, these travelers noted the little time they had known this place, and obviously the people themselves also pointed to the time variable as an important factor in knowing the place. In this regard, a 59-year-old woman stated:

“I am a traveler in Esfahan and this is my first time coming to this place, so I don't know much about this complex. I have visited many parts of this collection and enjoyed its beauty and cleanliness. I liked the zoo and the forest park. Overall, it's a beautiful place”.

A remarkable point about almost all the responses of the people in this group was the low number of visits and the duration of their attendance therein. This led to the lack of accurate knowledge of the place and a great deal of attention to the appearance and physical aspects of the place. People were less familiar with the place. In response to the question about listing specific places in the park, these people generally did not have a specific location in mind. They noted very general cases including the spiral path to the peak and the Telecabin. Accordingly, the meanings that these people had in mind from this place were mostly related to their use of the environment to meet their needs. In terms of meaning's level classification, it can be inferred that

they mostly understood the instrumental meanings of the environment. Out of 150 questionnaires, 57 (equal to 38%) were classified at this level.

B. The Second Group

This group included people who spent more time in the place than the first group. They introduced more specific places than the previous group when they were asked about their favorite places in the Sofeh Mountains complex. These places were generally either sociable or had a particular view of the city. They focused on these places because of memories they had of gatherings with their friends or their privacy in those places. Their responses about their motivations and reasons for coming to this place indicated that they had a deeper connection with parts of the collection that went beyond the perception of its apparent aesthetics. It seems that their main motivation for being in this place was not just about using its physical space and enjoying its exterior beauties. Their main motive was having memories of the past that happened in this place. For example, a 31-year-old man believed that:

“I come to this collection twice a month and spend 3-4 hours at this place every time. I have known this place since childhood and used to come here and have fun with my friends. I love the monuments of martyrs, the zoo, and the khajic waterfall in this collection more than the other places because each one reminds me many memories. The reason I come to this park, besides using fresh air and amenities of this complex, is to revive the beautiful past memories because past time can only be remembered by memories.”

As can be seen, many people come to this place because of their personal feelings, memories, and interests. When these people talk about the Sofeh Recreation Complex, they obviously have more information and a better understanding of this complex because they come here more frequently resulting in their deeper sense of this place than the first group. The expressions of these people show a good deal of interest in this place. They seem to come to this place more frequently because of the feelings and emotions they have in mind. So meanings formed in their minds from these places are more influenced by their sense of “emotional attachment to this place.” Out of 150 questionnaires, 56 (equal to 33.37%) were classified at this level. Thus, 33.37% of the respondents had sense of attachment to this place and were classified in the 2nd group.

C. The Third Group

This group consisted of people who visited more often with longer attendance times in the park than the other two groups. They expressed their nostalgic feelings about the park in their descriptions. Almost all of them were aware of the history and role of Mount Sofeh in the past, and their views of this recreational complex were quite different from those of the other groups. In their descriptions, these people generally referred to this place to be of historical antiquity with a trans-regional identity rendering them proud and honor.

In this respect, a 39-year-old woman pointed to a

historic castle in her interviews:

"I have researched on the Sofeh Mountain complex and I know that one of the famous places in the Sofeh Mountain is the Shahdeh or Shahdez Castle, also known as the Dive Castle, which is the legendary place referred to in many books. This mountain is rooted in Isfahan and in the history of the city and has been a place of interest since the Islamic times and even before. This place is of great value to me because of its ancient history and as far as I know, it was once the defensive wall of Isfahan city, so it is of national value to me."

A 32-year-old man mentioned his feelings about Mount Sofeh Park: "I spend 5-6 times a month between 3 and 5 hours each time. I have known this collection since childhood. Pachenar Spring, Darvish Spring, and Grass Run are my favorite places in this collection. Because of its high elevation relative to the city, the whole complex creates a beautiful view of Isfahan city. My motivation for coming to this place is the attractive history of this place. In my opinion, the Sofeh Mountain complex is a natural symbol of the historic city of Isfahan. This place is the highest point in Isfahan, on the top of which, all the city and houses can be seen as colored lights. I know this place as the rooftop of half the world. As far as I know, a Dutch artist painted Mount Sofeh in Isfahan in the past that has been published in books. In my opinion, this place is historical and has a worldwide reputation."

As can be seen from the above statements, their

motivations for coming to this place go far beyond the use of natural beauty or responding to their personal feelings and interests. These people have a transpersonal perception of this place. This group introduces the Sofeh Recreation complex as an iconic symbol in the city of Isfahan and they seem to have a sense of pride and honor to their city in their remarks. They introduced the Sofeh Mountain Park complex with features such as "Isfahan Highest Place", "Isfahan Natural Symbol", "Isfahan Natural Tower", "Isfahan Beautiful Landscape Window", "Esfahan Rooftop", and so on. It seems that the people in this group described the character of Sofeh Mountain Park on the scale of Isfahan City. They considered this collection as part of their identity and that of their city and strived to preserve and make it more known. Hence, this level of meaning, which is the deepest level of meaning in the course of human interaction with the environment, has been described as "place identity". Of the total respondents in this survey, 37 responses (equal to 19.33%) belonged to this group.

According to what has been discussed so far, people perceive the three different levels of meaning in their interaction with the Sofeh Mountain Park Complex depending on their motivations and duration of their presence therein. These levels include "instrumental meanings of place", "attachment to place" and "place identity", which are comparable to the three semantic levels mentioned by Gipson (1950). Figure 6 presents these classification levels.

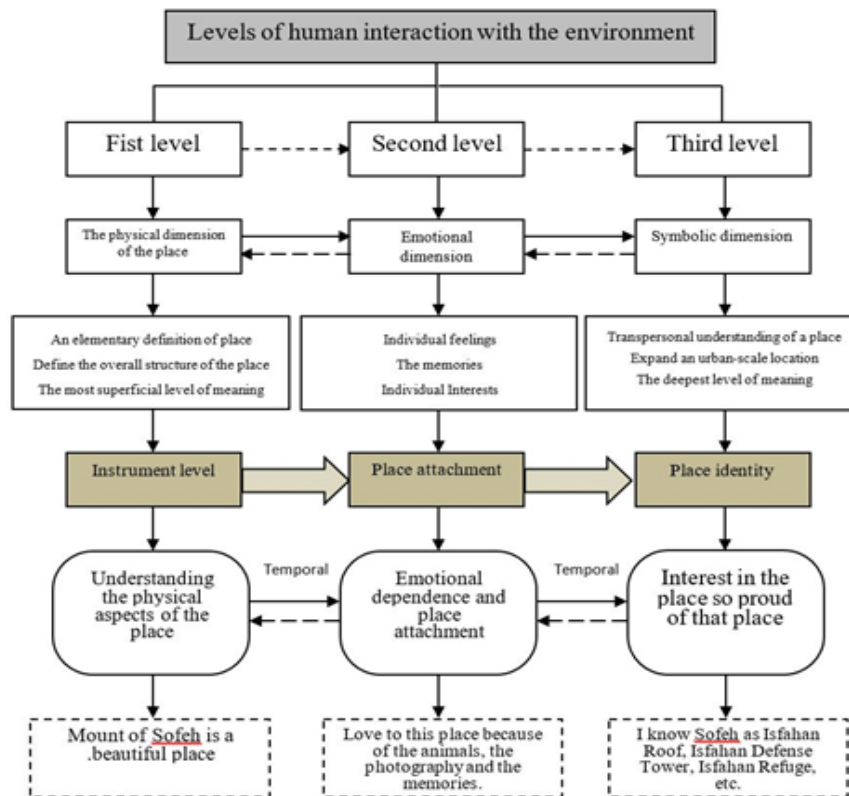


Fig. 6. Comparative Diagram of the Impact of Time on the Formation of Different Levels of Meaning in Human Interaction with Place

6. CONCLUSION

This research sought to explain and classify different levels of meanings that individuals perceive in one place during their interactions at different times. To achieve this goal, questions were first asked from the statistical population about the frequency of visits, duration of stay, and their motivation to attend the desired place. They were then asked to describe Mount Sofeh Park as our case study, and to explain the feelings and meanings formed in their minds. They were also asked to name a few specific places in the park they had in mind. After the survey, data on different meanings of individuals were analyzed with data on attendance motivations as well as the duration of acquaintance and visits to the park. The information of each questionnaire was analyzed individually and its meanings were classified separately and were placed in the table of meaning levels. Accordingly, the meanings obtained were classified into three levels of “instrumental meanings of place”, “place attachment”, and “place identity”.

In this regard, a group of people who visited the park very rarely, had a general understanding of the park. Obviously, people at this level had understood the superficial meanings derived from the geometrical properties and physical components of the place. The second group included people who came to the park for a longer time and were motivated by their own memories and feelings to attend the park. This level of meaning, which is mostly influenced by one’s inner and emotional emotions, is called attachment to place. The third level involved people who spent longer times in the park and were motivated to attend there beyond instrumental utilization or even responding to their personal emotions. In this case, the place becomes tied to one’s values and beliefs and holds symbolic meanings. This deep level of meaning is introduced as spatial identity. However, what can be deduced beyond these analyses is the role of time in the formation of such meanings for individuals. As such, the longer a person interacts with the place, the deeper the levels of meaning is formed for that person.

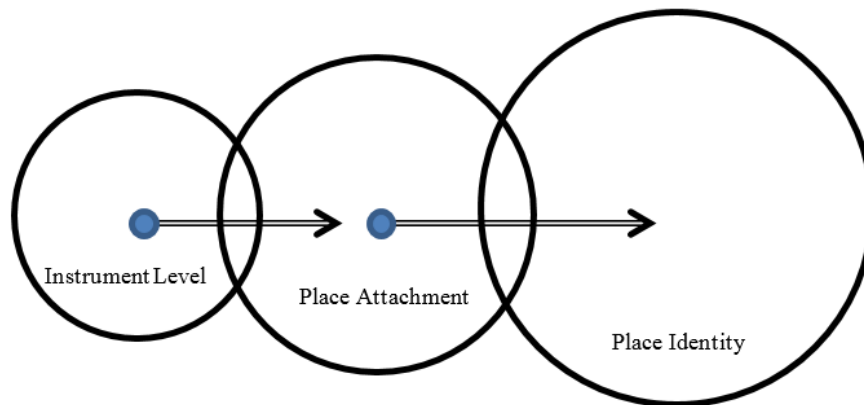


Fig. 7. Formation of Different Levels of Meaning over Time

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