Place Attachment and Sense of Belonging in the Offices

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Abstract

Organizations are often forced to modify their physical environment and relocate employees in response to new business strategies. However, the impact of these changes on employees is rarely considered. Many organisations are acutely aware of the costs associated with high staff turnover, staff alienation and recruitment. Recent innovations in workplace design such as hot-desking have further undermined our sense of belonging. This research considers the attachment employees have for their established work place. It is argued that this attachment may influence people’s response to the new environment and the move process. Issues of place attachment, personal expectations and perceptions can affect a person’s response to a changed environment, which may be at odds with a strong organisational imperative for a move. To date, however, our understanding of how these factors relate to each other is limited. This study seeks to expose the gaps in our understanding of 'attachment' as a phenomenon. It describes the methodology that will be used for a subsequent case study, which attempts to quantify and qualify the phenomenon of place attachment in the workplace. In particular it suggests how design elements can be introduced that nurture a sense of belonging in an organisation.

Keywords: Change Management; Place Attachment; Relocation; Sense of Belonging; Workplace Design

1. The Research on Workplace Attachment

1.1 Overview

Change has become a way of life for organizations, as the business environment has become increasingly dynamic. Many organizations are being forced to re-examine every way in which they can improve their performance. Workplace redesign and relocation has been used as a
catalyst by many organisations to introduce many elements of organisational change. However such change can have a significantly undermine performance and can cause long term damage to work relations. For this reason, thought needs to be given to the ways such changes are perceived by employees, and the consequences of such changes [1].

Despite the best efforts of corporate managers, 25 per cent of major change initiatives fail because employees are fearful of and resistant to change [2]. Most changes fail because the soft aspects of change are not properly managed. Employee resistance can pose significant obstacles to the planning and development of office space relocation, particularly for projects that attempt to change the way people work.

Office renovations and relocations are one of the most challenging aspects of a facility professional’s job to resolve growth and space constraint problems in organisations. Yet, to employees, the change can be seen as threat, disturbing and emotionally alienating. These placements can have serious negative and emotion-laden consequences when seen from the point of view of environmental deprivation [1].

Many organisations are acutely aware of the costs associated with high staff turnover, staff alienation, and recruitment. The cost of not overcoming the resistance to change can be enormous [3]. The negative attitude can affect the bottom line. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that U.S. companies lose $3 billion a year to the effects of negative attitudes and behaviours [4].

The research is particularly focused on the concept of place attachment to understand better the person’s response to a changed environment. In particular it suggests possible mechanisms for using the work environment as a way of accelerating our sense of belonging in the new workplace. In order to combine place attachment theory with practice, the research will undertake a case study analysis in which the research quantifies and qualifies the phenomenon of employee place attachment.

1.2 The Relevance of the Research

Psychologists and others concerned with work behaviour have long been interested in employees’ feelings in terms of outcomes such as satisfaction, stress and fatigue. In contrast to research on the expression of emotion, research on the experience of emotion is relatively underdeveloped [5]. Even though recent interest on affectors in the workplace has been intense, ignorance regarding the emotional significance of the physical environment remain.

Routinized interactions in a given location typically result in place attachment. An emotional bond is formed by an individual with a physical site. Having developed a ‘secure’ place attachment, the loss of such an attachment creates a stressful period of disruption. The move is
often a ‘loss experience’ for employees. Employees place attachments often go unrecognised by management involved in such transition processes [6]. Ignoring the emotional charge given by these employees has the potential to undermine the success of the move project and the organisation itself. The focus of this research is to expose the current gaps in our understanding of 'attachment' to previous workplaces as a phenomenon.

However today, social theorists are often skeptical about the importance of place and place attachment, as people seem to be increasingly mobile, and their social relations and other experiences become disembodied from physical location [7]. Far from reducing the importance paid to physical space, the focus on knowledge work and increasing productivity in the new economy lead to more increased emphasis on creating the “right” working spaces. Although technologies have the potential to enable people to work anywhere, people still need to choose to work somewhere [8].

Much of the previous research about psychology in work environments is largely defined by the outcomes and facets of the physical environment. For the individual employee, such research has focused on the outcomes of satisfaction and performance and their association with the ambient environment. For interpersonal relationships, it has focused on the outcomes of communication and group formation, cohesion, as well as their relationship with features of the workspaces and layout. For the organisation, the focus has been on organisational effectiveness and its association with the features and layout of buildings [9].

These studies with their behaviourist approach assume that change is best achieved by considering “external” factors. For example a change agent working on these assumptions would look for those reinforcements which are producing the current behaviour. Having specified the new behaviour precisely, the object would be to set up a schedule of reinforcement to encourage the necessary change [10]. On the other hand the cognitive approach is based on the belief that behaviour is controlled by “internal” factors, such as the individual’s beliefs, assumptions and theories about the situation. To change behaviour, therefore you have to change these internal theories [10].

This research is concerned with the cognitive, affective and behavioural processes which contribute to a person’s attachment with a place. Issues of place attachment, personal expectations and perceptions have a significant bearing on a person’s response to a changed environment, even when a move provides a path for economic improvement. To date, however, our understanding of how these factors relate to each other and place attachment is rather limited in move projects in organisations.

After describing the aims and objectives, the paper will reconsider previous work done on place attachment phenomenon. Empirical research findings are drawn from a broad-ranging literature
review. The resulting research model will be applied to the proposed case study and the validity of this model assessed.

1.3 Aims and Objectives of the Study

Change and transition recur in the lives of people and are part of human development. Although for some people change is positive, for others it is difficult to accomplish without disruption and distress [11].

The main aim of the study is to determine the impact of place attachment in employees’ perception of change. It seeks to describe the socio-psychological and behavioural effects of changes in the physical environment on employees.

The second aim of this study is to explore the meanings such adjustments hold for employees exposed to changing environments over time. And discover how these meanings influence to adopt new environment.

The third aim is to examine the extent of employees’ place attachment in old and new environments. This involves isolating aspects of the person–place transactions which have affected their ability to detach from the old environment and attach to the new.

The objectives of the study are:

• To expose the current gaps in our understanding of “attachment” as a phenomenon
• To investigate human reaction to change in the environment
• To measure the significance of this reaction to business performance
• To obtain tools for communicating concepts of change management.

There are pragmatic and facilities management implications arising from the phenomenon of place attachment. Further investigation of the affective relationships that all employees have with their workplace will aid in appropriately designing and managing facilities.

2. Previous Research on Place Attachment

2.1 What is place attachment?

The psychology of place is an emerging area of research that explores the association between individuals and their immediate environment-setting. The psychology of place assumes that
individuals require a “good enough” environment in which to live. People are linked to that environment through three key psychological processes: (1) attachment; (2) familiarity, and (3) identity. Displacement breaks these emotional connections. The ensuing disorientation, nostalgia, and alienation may undermine the sense of belonging and mental health in general [12].

Familiarity refers to the processes by which people develop detailed cognitive knowledge of their environs. Place identity is concerned with the extraction of a sense of self, based on the places in which one occupies in life [12].

Place attachment is the pattern of reactions that a setting stimulates for a person. These reactions are a product of both features of setting (what settings are) and personal processes (what the people bring to it) (Figure 1) [31].

![Diagram of Place Attachment](https://example.com/diagram.png)

*Figure 1: Place Attachment, the link of features of setting and personal processes (adapted from Steele F., 1981)*

Milligan (1995) defines place attachment as “the emotional link formed by an individual to a setting that has been given meaning through interaction, comprised of two interwoven components: the interactional past and the interactional potential of the setting” [13].

The *interactional past* refers to past experiences: in other words “memories” associated with a setting. Places have the power to recall emotions and stir memories that have been dormant while the person was away from the place. *Interactional* potential refers to the future experiences imagined and anticipated to be possible in a setting, or in other words “expectations”. An individual’s experiences within and in relation to a specific setting, result in a set of expectations for future interactions in the setting.
In forming people-place interactions, what people bring to their setting is as important as the place itself. A particular setting becomes a place to an individual specifically because of the activities that have occurred within its boundaries, which then come to be associated with the setting. A history develops that is tied to the experiences of people that have occurred within the setting. At the same time, specific features of the setting shape, constrain and influence the people’s perceptions and expectations for evaluating new settings [6].

Setting acts as also as a facilitator of needs. Place is important in the extent to which it satisfies a need. Stokols and Shumaker (1981) suggested that the degree to which a particular setting satisfies the needs and goals of an individual determines his or her judgement of its quality [14]. This quality judgement regulates the attachment to a place.

Within the past few years, place attachment has been studied by scholars from several disciplines such as: anthropology; architecture; family and consumer studies; folklore, gerontology; landscape architecture; leisure and recreational studies; marketing; psychology; sociology; social ecology; and urban planning. This diverse research is bringing to bear different philosophical approaches, theoretical formulations, and research methodologies. Perhaps, the most important challenge for researchers in this area of inquiry is to integrate different viewpoints and approaches [15].

Giuliani et al. (1993) group the differences in the researchers’ definitions of place attachment according to several characteristics [16]:

- the content of the bond: affective, cognitive, and/or symbolic
- the valence of the bond: positive or negative
- the specificity of the bond. Some researchers choose to consider attachment as a broad concept, a super-ordinate category whereby affects are designated as part of an entire system such as ‘set of feelings’. Others seem to consider attachment a specific affect that is distinct from other kinds of affects which are part of the same system.

Problems arise if we accept a broadened definition of place attachment. Such definitions of the phenomenon become so general that they fail to explicate the nature of the cognitions and affects that characterise psychological bonds, linkages, ties, and so forth with places. It also obscures the conceptual distinctions between different affective bonds and their dynamics.

As a result, the role of place in people’s lives is more complex than we understand. Attachment can be viewed as a multilevel person-place bond that evolves from specifiable conditions of place and characteristics of people. This fact has implications for the attitudes and behaviours of individuals toward their socio-physical environments [17].
2.2 The Process of Place Attachment

Place attachment operates in the background of awareness. It is difficult to assess. Shock of disruption helps to clarify what has been disrupted. A study of place attachment starts with an understanding of disruptions of place attachment.

Repeated interactions in specific settings including organisational locations typically result in place attachment. An emotional bond forms between an individual and a physical site. After the development of secure place attachments, the loss of normal attachments creates a stressful period of disruption followed by a post-disruption phase of coping with lost attachments, followed by the creation of new ones [18]. There are discernible patterns across the phases of attachment and disruption (Figure 2).

![Figure 2: The transition cycle (adopted from Nigel Nicholson (1990))](image)

Place attachments develop slowly but can be disrupted quickly and can create the need for a long-term phase of dealing with the loss and repairing or re-creating attachments to people and places. These three phases are interdependent, as qualities of the initial attachment or disruption can ease or exacerbate the stress of loss and difficulty of re-creating attachments. Much of the challenge facing those with disruptions of place attachment is to negotiate reconciliation between the past (what has been lost) and the future. Certain aspects of pre-disruption attachment may forecast the extent and severity of the disruption and the availability and effectiveness of coping mechanisms [18]. Therefore attachments are important for their long-term consequences. Place attachments are continuous and form a dynamic model of people-place bonds [16]. The most stabilised conditions contain the possibility of future change, and therefore embody varying states of readiness for the onset of a new transition cycle [32].

There are two important studies that specifically address the process by which place attachment is formed. Fuhrer and Kaiser’s (1992) work entitled “Attachment to the home place: the emotional
bases" is important as it explores the aspects necessary for the formation and maintenance of place attachment [19].

Fuhrer and Kaiser (1992) advanced the field of people-place relationships by thinking of place as a facilitator of emotional needs. They adapted Bischof’s model of social motivation which suggests that “four emotions represent the core of social regulations: security, arousal, autonomy and libido. Thus, “places are experienced in terms of these emotions and represent the basis for regulating both identity and social interaction” [19]. They developed and tested a model involving three processes of place attachment. Place was described as a facilitator of emotional needs, based on the emotions of (1) security, (2) autonomy and (3) arousal. Significant relationships between social and physical qualities of the home place and of the emotional dimensions were found. The results revealed that these emotional meanings represent the bases of attachment to the home place.

Gerda Spellers’ (1996) work has expanded Fuhrer and Kaiser’s concepts on the aspects of place attachment, including external stimulation, emphasizing the importance of appropriation and place congruence [20]. These aspects not only seemed to lead place attachment but also play an important role in order to maintain it. However, she also argues that further research is needed to establish whether these five aspects of place attachment are apparent in other research contexts, such as work environments.

2.3 The Models of Place Attachment

Several models of people-place relationships have been put forth in an effort to provide framework for how people develop ties to places and some has received limited empirical tests.

Gerson et al. (1977) in his structural alternative model focused on attachment at the individual level [21]. They define attachment as “an individual’s commitment to the neighbourhood and neighbours”. This commitment takes the form of both social involvement and subjective feelings. According to this model, attachment develops as a result of an explicit cost/benefit analysis. The individual is believed to evaluate the neighbourhood based on what he or she is giving up or gaining by living there. As long as the benefits outweigh the costs, an individual feels some attachment to the area. Both people and place characteristics are considered within this comparison and contribute to attachment [22].

Stokols and Shumaker’s (1981) in their model of place dependence relied heavily on Gerson et al.’s (1977) model of place attachment and extrapolating directly from Thibaut and Kelley’s(1959) model of comparison level and comparison level for alternatives [23]. They hypothesized that persons may become dependent upon their current dwelling and neighbourhood through comparison process. The individual considers the number, range, and salience of needs
being met by the current home, including the quality of resources available in the area, and this analysis yields a “comparison level”. The individual goes through a similar process in considering alternative places. If the current locale compared unfavourably with potential alternatives, the person was not considered to be dependent upon the current place, and was in fact more likely to move.

Stokols and Shumaker (1981) develop the concept of place dependence or an “occupant’s perceived strength of association between him or herself and specific places”. They proposed that the assessment of “strength of association” involves a two-component process, including an individual’s judgement of: the quality of current place; and the relative quality of comparable alternative places.

Stokols and Shumaker expanded their model of place dependence to include integration of satisfaction. Attachment derives from a positive evaluation of the quality of the place vis-à-vis one’s needs to what extent the environment allows certain functions to be carried out. Attachment will be all the stronger the greater the number and the more important the needs satisfied. But the basis of the model remained more cognitive than affective [24].

Stokols at al. (1983) reported empirical support for the place dependence model of person-place transactions. However dependence as described by Stokols and Shumaker (1981), can be affectively different from attachment Stokols et al. (1983), these researchers did not maintain this distinction in their empirical research. Instead they used a direct measure of attachment, as well as their measures of place dependence, to examine the effect of person-place bonds on outcomes of interest.

Prohansky (1978) took a totally different approach in his discussion of the relationship between people and places [25]. Whereas the other two models operate attachment in a functional sense with reference to places, symbolic attachment can also be found for places that have only symbolic value, which embody group identity, etc [17]. Prohansky defined place-identity as an individual’s awareness and perception of the world as represented by a collection of “memories, conceptions, interpretations, ideas, and related feelings about specific physical settings as well as types of settings”. And attachment derives from the meaning the place has for person’s identity [26]

The model does provide a useful theoretical explanation of why people may need to develop attachments or bonds to their socio-physical environments. There are problems however, with the breadth of the theory as there are very limited empirical studies to test the relationship of place to the development of self identity. In addition, Prohansky argues that place identity is both cognitive and affective; yet it is unclear how these separate systems operate in defining place identity.
The purpose of this review is to obtain an understanding of the vast volume of theoretical and empirical work on place attachment in order to clarify the relationship between and person and place and provide the background for the research design.

3. Research Design

Change is an experience which can be threatening in advance however very little is known about why change should be threatening. Personal meanings are important determinants of the impact of change [10]. A key to the meaning of place lies in the expressions that people use when they want to give it a sense carrying greater emotional charge than location or functional node.

The question which must always be raised is whether the new environment produces demands and situations which are different from the individual expects. What practices should organisations undertake to maximize the benefits and minimise the costs of the rising tide of transitions? The conceptual framework of the study aims to answer such questions.

The relocation projects provide the opportunity for a field experiment in which facilitators and inhibitors to the formation of place attachment can be identified during the whole process. As part of the British Facilities Management, Thames Valley Network, given the opportunity to study several work groups that will experience office renovation within the same facility in Nationwide Headquarter, Swindon.

The study involved a three phase-longitudinal approach conducted over an eighteen month period to monitor the process of place attachment (and detachment) starting two months before the relocation and ending sixteen months post relocation. Data was gathered primarily from in-depth interviews. However a survey instrument was also used to measure attitudes.

The case study relocation scheme was announced and accepted in July 2003 and the first interviews in phase 1 of the study, took place in March 2004, one month before relocation. The relocation followed in April 2004. The second set of interviews, I2 were undertaken in June 2004 as well as questionnaires. The timing for data collecting phases (periods) were determined by theoretical and practical considerations. After the move, the two month period was considered to be long enough for people to gain a sense of permanence and not be caught up in the frustration of practical tasks regarding the move. Seven month post-relocation was thought to allow enough time for people to evaluate the new situation about their attachments in the final phase of data collection.

A longitudinal approach was important to understand the dynamics of place attachment. It was intended to show the nature of the growth and trace patterns of change in an individual [27]. The
rich data provided by repeated in-depth interviews with employees over a one year period provided an essential resource for exploring the process of change.

Several problem points can be derived from analytical approaches in previous place attachment studies:

- In place attachment studies a variety of approaches exist (either theory building or theory testing) which lack coherence
- Place attachment can be thought of as both a product and outcome (i.e. feeling attached) and a process (i.e. reasons for attachment) [24] [28]
- The existing theory on “place attachment” is incomplete and may not be applicable in all types of work environment.

The proposed model is adopted from Passini’s (1992) model of cognitive mapping. Passini suggested that people cycle through a set of decisions using a process of ‘matchmaking’ to evaluate a decision and determine behaviour [29] [30]. As place attachment is a cognitive process, matched feedback process well explains how this mechanism works in a changing environment; people cycle through within move (before move, on the move and after move). Our expectation of a future setting is the product of our past experiences. In a familiar environment, a person recalls what should be sensed at a location and this is checked against what is actually sensed. If there is a match, then a planned behaviour is executed, as establishing new attachments. If the two do not match, it is problematic; he shows resistance to change. New approaches are needed to manage the expectations and attitudes. It is suggested that once precursors of his previous attachment are identified, they can be used as a mechanism to adapt to new situations and find the match to continue the process (Figure 3).

While defining the attachment, one should consider not only cognitive bonds which explain the operational aspect, but also the emotional and symbolic content of the bond which covers the precursor of attachments; individual characteristics influencing attachments; and characteristics of places which influence whether people attach to them. Place attachment is the pattern of reactions that a setting stimulates for a person. These reactions are a product of both cognitive and emotional/symbolic aspects of the bond (Figure 1).
There have been many attempts to conceptualise the process of interacting with an environment and the role of place attachment in determining spatial behaviours. While the previous models reflect on the complexity of place attachment, they go no further in providing testable hypotheses that would stimulate research. The proposed model in this study, offers some integration of the processes, concepts, and relationships involved.

It would be wrong to suggest that previous models explaining place attachment are mutually exclusive. They place different emphasis on the importance of stability and, therefore, on the consequences of leaving a place. The proposed model takes account of this issue. While the emphasis of the research is on the emotional and symbolic bonds, a quantitative survey explaining the cognitive process of attachment would provide numerical support for the links.

4. Conclusions

The analysis confirms the presence of “place attachment” issues in the cases studied. Employees and the management of the department expressed concerns about this. The question raised is ‘what conflicts arise between user expectations and the eventual characteristics of the new work environment?’ Moreover, ‘what practices should organisations undertake to minimise change resistance and to maximise the benefits of organisations connecting people through their beliefs and feelings?’ The conceptual framework of the study aims to answer such questions.
It has been shown that place disruptions (move experiences) interrupt the processes that bind people to their socio-environments. In order to understand the impact of this disruption, one must examine: (1) pre-existing conditions that influence the experience of attachments, as well as (2) post disruption conditions that influence how individuals can cope with their losses and begin rebuilding ties to places and people [18]. The difficulty of coping with loss and re-constructing place attachment is that organisations rarely appreciate the depth and extent of these attachments and yet these emotional connections remain unmanaged.

Change is necessary. Without it, organisations and individuals become complacent and stale. However in managing change, the critical task is to understand how changing one element changes the rest; how sequencing and pace affect the whole structure. Achieving this critical balance means balancing new strategies whilst preserving the sense of continuity. This is achieved by managing the organisational context in which change occur and creating connections with employees. The question of place attachment has a role to play in managing the emotional connections with new workplaces. Facilities managers, designers and planners need to be aware that people become attached to place and that they are likely to encounter resistance from them. In the knowledge that place attachment is a significant part of human well-being and psycho-cultural adaptation to an environment, designers may be able to solve problems of work space design. Design elements can be introduced that nurture a sense of belonging in an organisation.

References


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