

The space in between people and environment

Transforming places and shaping meaning

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My research falls within the field of Environmental Psychology, which examines the relationship between people and their surroundings. In my work, I have focused on the concept of *relationship*, which I define for this presentation as “*the space in between*” people and environment, an intangible dimension that connects people to place and gives rise to meaning. I found that meaning might play a critical role in linking global sustainable goals with people’s inner development goals. In recent projects, I have explored place-based changes that promote both health and environmental sustainability within urban landscapes. I have raised questions such as: what theoretical models can capture the complexity of people-environment relationships during place transformations? What aspects of the urban environment influence acceptance of sustainable interventions? And how do intangible dimensions like attachments to place impact both acceptance and the livability of urban environments?

As such I aimed to provide urban planners and disciplines like landscape architecture and traffic planning research with insights into not only, the physical qualities of the environment, but also the shared meanings and values held by those who use these places. This approach moves beyond simply focusing on functionality, or aesthetic improvements, to include also the relational aspects of people to their everyday surroundings. It is not just about bricks, planting more trees, changing outdoor light sources or reducing car traffic, it is also about ‘non-things’, the intangible dimension that shape our experience of place. Understanding how people co-create and co-evolve meaning with their environment, and how these processes are rooted in specific places, can offer valuable guidance for decision-making aimed at fostering social and environmental sustainability, connecting and shaping global sustainable goals with people’s inner development goals.

This perspective challenges the traditional view of place as merely a container for activity. Instead, it opens the door to viewing place as a dynamic opportunity for developing new-shared values. For this presentation, I will focus on a study of car-free street experiments in Swedish cities. This type of place-based change is as a learning by doing type of intervention, which is temporary at first, and therefore easier to justify from a policy maker’s perspective, and yet, it has the potential to form a longer-term discussion of change. I will share the study findings, with a focus on how meaning created through; attachment to place and quality of life perceptions influence attitudes toward and the livability of these places. Additionally, I will introduce the theoretical model developed in my previous research, which integrates insights and tools from multiple disciplines to better understand the relationship between people and their urban environments. I invite you to join me in this discussion.