

## **Perceiving places as essentialist entities: Implications for place identity, place memory, and openness to social diversity and change**

Places are usually defined as “meaningful localizations”. This means that not all settings are considered by people as meaningful. Of course sources of meanings vary. Places may be meaningful because of autobiographical memories associated with them or because significant people live there or for many other reasons. But places are also meaningful because of the way they look – their physical features. Our project deals with the relationship between physical features of places and their perceived meaningfulness. Our special focus is on the concept of the places’ *genius loci* – the spirit of place – an impalpable sense of the place’s uniqueness and “essence” that defines it and differentiates from other places. We believe that there are places that are perceived as having their *genius loci* and places that are deprived of it (e.g., “non-places”). In this project we will try to define features that contribute to the perception of places as having their *genius loci*. We also assume that people will identify more with such places but that they will also be more resistant to changes introduced to these places, both physical, such as construction of new building or tearing down the old ones, and social – when new people, perhaps from other ethnic groups, move in.

However, we also assume that people may differ in their place preferences, some people would consider as meaningful places that are open and changing, without a clear, stable identity. If such is the case, we will assume that they will also be more open to the places’ physical and social changes. In our project we will focus on differences in people’s preferences, their psychological causes and consequences. We will also consider possibilities of experimentally switching people’s preferences and we will test the ensuing consequences.

Along with investigating effects of places’ physical features we will also study consequences of the way people perceive history of their places of residency: whether they assume that the place has changed little (similar people, with similar values, have lived there all the time) or whether it changed a lot (it is a totally different place now), or changed but in a logically understandable way. We predict that people identify more with places which they perceive as continuous rather than discontinuous. We also predict that people who assume cultural (“essentialist”) continuity of places will tend to deny that the places were multicultural in the past and will be less open to their changes and social diversity in the future. In contrast, we predict that if the place history is perceived as a chain of causally interrelated events (“narrative” continuity) this would effectuate in openness to the place’s multicultural past, stronger interest in the place’s history, and more openness to social diversity in the future. We will investigate differences between people in how they perceive continuity of their places of residency, and will test causes and consequences of these differences. We will also try to experimentally manipulate the perceived continuity of places.

We will test these (and other) hypotheses in several studies, both in big surveys carried out in several cities of Poland, and in a series of experimental studies. We will try to account for the multisensory character of places and apply a variety of methods to test people’s emotional reactions to places, perceived meaningfulness and attitudes towards their changes. We will use verbal scales but also specially prepared pictures, and we will also make use of the modern technological development such as virtual and augmented realities to make people feel that they find themselves in real environments.

The project builds on previous research of the project leader and her team, published in refereed journals and summarized in the book *Psychologia miejsca (Psychology of place)* (2012). This project is a continuation of this work and its ultimate goal is to identify places that will be a source of positive affect and strong emotional bonds among people while at the same time encourage openness to social diversity and stimulate favorable attitudes towards inevitable place changes. We hope that with this project we will move forward the new psychological discipline: psychology of place.