"The Social Significance of Place"

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Abstract:

Whilst much research on the relationship between people and places is based upon a construct of 'place' comprising the physical realm, the activities within that realm, and the meaning produced therein, other place research focuses on the social networks that extend beyond the geographic location of place, thus apparently contradicting two of three components of those earlier constructs. This paper reports on empirical research into one 'product' of place, namely the commercial retail mall, the results of which reconcile these contradictions through a refinement of both arguments.

The research, based in Hong Kong, was a grounded theory investigation into consumer processes for creating retail place image. The theory that resulted from that research proposed that consumers associated the retail place with a particular stratum of society, through a series of interpretive processes that attach personal and social meaning to that place. The resultant consumer image conceptualized the place as an integral and representative part of that social stratum and, in consequence, there was an associated series of consumer actions, behaviours, and appearances deemed to be expected and appropriate for that mall. The research produced a hierarchy of consumer engagements, both self- and social-engagements, that led to the development of personal/social meaning related to the place. This in turn led to the consumer production of a 'character frame' - a set of socially acceptable parameters governing action, appearance and behaviour – from which a variety of identities could be adopted or assumed that were considered appropriate to that image of place. Based on that image consumers could determine whether they accepted or rejected the positioning of that place as 'suitable' or desirable to themselves.

This paper compares this theory firstly to traditional models of place (e.g. Agnew (1987); Canter (1977, 1997); Gustafson (2001); Relph (1976)) which treat place as a construct comprising the physical realm, activities, and meaning. Then, secondly, the theory is compared to place models that focus on social interaction (e.g Easthope 2004; Massey 1994, 1995). The outcome is a restructuring of these models that presents place as a process

(rather than a construct) whereby meaning is created through social engagement within the broader context of physical, cultural, historic, and political activities. This meaning is then used to formulate personal and community perceptions of place. The purpose of this paper is to emphasise the social significance of place to people, to articulate the process of meaning creation in relation to place, and to propose that much of this meaning is processed through social interaction.