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Place attachment and place remaking in marginalized neighborhoods by their inhabitants



A study analyzes the characteristics of environmental activism in historically marginalized urban neighborhoods of Casc Antic in Barcelona, the area of CayoHueso in Havana and Dudley in Boston. The

place attachment that people have with their neighborhoods is the main motivation for the action, which aims community reconstruction and revitalization of the surrounding neighborhood to restore local identity and environmental quality and reverse abandonment and decay of the neighborhood.

Since 2001, low-income residents, immigrants, and their various supporters in the Casc Antic neighborhood of Barcelona have joined forces to revitalize degraded areas by beautifying community spaces, self-managing parks and playgrounds, and building community gardens. Similarly, since 1988, inhabitants and organizations from the degraded Afro-Cuban neighborhood of Cayo Hueso, Havana, have organized farms, green spaces, and playgrounds. In Dudley, a Cape-Verdean, Latino, and African American neighborhood in Boston, residents and local organizations have rallied since the 1980s to transform abandoned lots into urban farms, parks, fresh food markets, bakeries, sports centers, and playgrounds. These cases illustrate how community activists in historically marginalized urban neighborhoods proactively work to improve the environmental quality of their place, and this in cities in the Global North and South.

Previous research in the field called environmental justice has documented that environmental hazards and accidents are disproportionately located in excluded neighborhoods and that local residents are increasingly protesting environmental harms as well as poor living conditions. However, to date less is known about how the identities of these activists, their sense of place, and their interpretation of broader urban history influence environmental mobilization in historically marginalized communities. Beyond the general objectives of “greening,” sustainability, or social justice, what are the personal, intimate, and place-based meanings of urban environmental activism?

In this article, through the case study of Casc Antic (Barcelona), Dudley (Boston), and La Habana (Cuba), I attempt to understand the role of place attachment in environmental mobilization in distressed neighborhoods across different political systems and urbanization contexts. I examine the different connections that activists develop and express toward neighborhoods with long-time substandard environmental conditions and how their experience of the neighborhood shapes their engagement in environmental revitalization projects.

Engaged residents and their nonprofit supporters in Casc Antic, Dudley, and Cayo Hueso have a strong connection to the neighborhood through its physical and architectural features and the ties they have built in it over time. This connection to place also rests on history and traditions, common experiences of fragmentation and disruption, and activism itself. However, over time activists’ neighborhood experience and attachment made them realize the pervasive consequences of neighborhood abandonment, decay, and degradation on environmental quality as well as on local identity. This memory and realization, filtered by a sense of responsibility, a desire for personal growth, and a commitment to the urban environment, prompted them to become engaged in their locale through socio-environmental projects. Activists have taken action in a wide variety of complementary domains—moving, for instance, from clean up to safe farming, green spaces to physical activity—which build on each other.

Most important, activists tied their community work for environmental revitalization in Dudley, Cayo Hueso, and Casc Antic to remaking a place for residents. Regardless of political systems and urbanization contexts, residents of marginalized neighborhoods share the loss and fear of erasure through multiple forms of disruption to their neighborhood – from gentrification to tourism expansion. Consequently, local activists believe in creating welcoming, protective, repairing, and nurturing neighborhood environments. They aim to rebuild a broken urban community, and fight against grief. Their mobilization is rooted in memories, healing, and resilience. For instance, projects such as urban farms and community gardens are motivated both by feelings of nostalgia toward disappearing community practices, which local activists attempt to recreate and by a desire to rebuild a more vibrant, cohesive, and welcoming place for residents.

In addition, environmental activists closely connect environmental justice and safety to their place remaking. They are also seeking to recreate refuges and safe havens for historically excluded residents. Green spaces such as community gardens or parks contribute to restorative healing not only at the individual level, but also at the community level. Safe havens are pedagogical spaces that enable marginalized residents to receive support, reclaim memories, and rebuild a positive individual and collective identity after years of decay and abandonment.

In sum, at the local urban scale, broad differences in levels of development do not seem to matter much to community-sponsored and community-led initiatives. What seems more important are the ways in which individuals and groups perceive exclusion in the city, experience place attachment as a motivator for action, and develop visions for place reconstruction and remaking.

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References

Isabelle Anguelovski. From Environmental Trauma to Safe Haven: Place Attachment and Place Remaking in Three Marginalized Neighborhoods of Barcelona, Boston, and Havana. *City & Community* 12(3):211-237. 2013.

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