

# Childhood Environmental Memories - What are They and to What Use Do We Put Them?

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## Résumé

Il est suggéré que les souvenirs liés à l'environnement rendent l'individu conscient du processus continu qui consiste à la fois à se différencier et à se relier psychologiquement à l'environnement. Dans les souvenirs, des expériences antérieures de ce processus sont présentes, quelquefois de façon très fragmentaire et souvent de manière non explicite. Les souvenirs liés à l'environnement chez l'adulte peuvent être rattachés à la façon moins intellectuelle de l'enfant d'éprouver l'environnement. L'élaboration psychologique d'expériences en relation avec l'environnement peuvent devenir la condition pour certaines personnes pour que s'exprime leur créativité sous forme d'écriture, de composition musicale ou autre.

## Summary

Environmental memories make the individual aware of the never ending process of differentiating himself from as well as relating him psychologically to the environment. In environmental memories earlier experiences of this process are present, sometimes fragmented and often not explicit. Environmental memories in grown ups can be traced to children's less intellectual way of experiencing the environment. The psychological elaboration of experiences of relatedness to the environment may be a background condition for some individuals for their novel writing, musical composing among other artistic activities.

## The role of environment in stimulating creativity

In an interview recently on Swedish radio the Finnish Swedish author Johan Bargum described how he came to Stockholm to work as a writer but did not succeed until he had returned to Finland. There were two sorts of landscapes, he explained, which alone seemed capable of inspiring him to work as a writer, the landscape of his

childhood and the "landscape" of Helsinki, the capital, where he had been living as a student. For his creative resources to be stimulated he was dependent on feeling 'at home' in the physical environment.

It seemed to me that Bargum was not only using the memories of his childhood landscape to put him into the mood to write but that he was also recreating the intense relationship between himself and the physical environment from his childhood and early adult years. In so doing he also created the necessary and sufficient conditions for him to write. By recreating this relationship to the physical environment he entered into emotionally deeper layers of his personality, layers where the definite boundaries have not yet been drawn between the individual and the environment and where the individual - symbolically - by phrasing this "boundary" in words - creates, again and again, the relationship that simultaneously separates him from and links him to the environment. A situation such as this might be described as typical of creative activity.

In his article, "The inner child and the city", Noschis says that "if the child does not live inside us, if it has no chance of growing, then we are cut off from - or even dead to - life" (Noschis 1992, 50). This might be another way of phrasing the idea hinted at above that as grown ups we need to - and most of us certainly do so whether or not we are conscious of it - refer back to our childhood experiences in order to evaluate and reevaluate our present experiences. The role of the physical environment in this process is of great importance as so much of our identity is linked to a certain landscape and a special physical environment. There are many indications in descriptions of childhood memories that individuals have "discovered themselves" as individuals when alone away from home, in nature, in a special landscape. This extraordinary experience has been a confirmation of the importance of that very landscape as well as of the experience itself. Feeling at home in the landscape where this discovery took place and where it can be reexperienced, is like recognizing oneself. This is one psychological use among others which we make of the surrounding physical environment and which will be discussed in this paper.

Feeling at home, that "ordinary" way of expressing the experience of being satisfied with one's inward and outward orientation to life, goes back to the intuitive knowledge of a place that develops in the young child as she understands how to find her way around on her own. It starts with the home of our childhood and stretches further and further out (into environments at times quite distant from the environment of our childhood) as we grow older and become individuals in our own right. The security the young child experiences while moving around increases as he gets capable of naming things experienced previously predominately through his senses. The landscape speaks to him and he speaks back to it. He is truly dependent on his own capacity to "understand" the landscape, to find his way.

This meaning is first fragmentarily structured by various sense impressions but becomes more coherent when it later gets named and is eventually given a symbolic meaning. The relationship between the child and her landscape can thus be said to be

relatively open and dynamic as there is an emotionally strong "interdependence" between the two and no settled relationship until at a late mental stage.

### **Emotional investment in the environment**

The importance of environmental memories to the grown up is to remind him again and again of the psychologically strong "interdependence" between himself and the landscape. The strong emotional investment by the individual in the environment - his preoccupation - might be one explanation of the fact that these memories typically do not include people. The emotional occupation is with the landscape itself and expressed in the relationship of the individual to the landscape.

The psychoanalyst Harold F. Searles has brought our attention to the strong emotional investment in nature by the child and the adolescent by claiming that there is a special phase in development when this investment ceases to be directed to the physical and non-human world and instead is turned to the human world. This is the transitional period when, as Searles puts it, the adolescent becomes "more deeply human, and aware and accepting of his or her human status vis-à-vis the nonhuman environment, than had been true before. In this transitional period, he turns his greatest interest from the world of Nature and of other nonhuman things, to the world of his fellow beings" (Searles 1960, 89).

It might seem from this quotation that Searles would think that by passing this period we don't again experience the landscape as strongly as we once did. Using our memory, however, there might be a possibility for us to return to the "original" strong feelings. In analyzing these environmental memories our childhood comes back to us as has been pointed out by some authors (e.g. Sebba, 1991; Cooper Marcus, 1992 and Chawla 1992).

From several studies (Björklid, 1982; Skantze, 1989; Nordström, 1990 and Lieberg, 1992 to name but a few Swedish studies) we know that there is a pattern in the way children of different ages move around in and mentally represent the physical surrounding. When comparing how children of different ages verbally express their environmental conceptualizations it seems that, at the age when they are about to establish finally their verbal command, as shown in written language, there is a strong dynamic quality to their conceptualizations. This dynamic quality does not appear in the stage prior to or after this particular phase.

### **The interdependence of intellect and emotion in mental development**

The above findings were made when children aged 9 to 17 years old were asked to write essays about how they would like to live (Nordström 1990). From analyzing their essays it is clear that the children can be put in three developmental groups, one aged 9-12, another 13-15 and a third group of children aged 16-17. The task of writing an essay was handled quite differently by the children, due to their varying writing and thinking capacities. The essays by the youngest group can be characterized as short messages, informing the reader of objects which the children

like. These objects seem to be visualized by the children in their minds and their writing has the quality of describing in words things that they themselves "see". The relationships between the words are nonexistent to many (but not all) of these children as they don't put words into sentences but enumerate them, one after another, and the relationships of the things enumerated are therefore not described. Things just exist without indication of location or function. These essays have an air of self evidence about them.

In the middle group, children aged 13 to 15 years, the desire to write coherently and at length is evident. These essays are long and clearly demonstrate the writers' delight in verbal mastery. They also seem to "know" that they create the world they are writing about.

The oldest group, youngsters 16 to 17 years old, expresses no desire to demonstrate their writing skills, being confident, or so it seems, that they know how to write. Their essays are shorter than those by the middle group and they are far less systematic. These writers are not occupied with the desire to show all they know about housing and mention only certain aspects of interest to themselves like special design items or general qualities like peacefulness or the possibility of meeting friends at home at parties and therefore the need in their houses for lot of space. Their mood is different from that of the younger children; not joyful as in the youngest ones, not forcefully dynamic as in the middle group but rather romantic and philosophical, at times hesitant.

For the purpose of this paper, it is worthwhile to focus on the writers in the middle group as they seem to be about to establish a world of verbal coherence out of nonverbal experiences. In a way which cannot be found in the essays by the youngest and oldest writers these children vividly describe physical movement in their essays. There is an intense motion and wandering about - from the outside (garden) to the inside (house), from the bottom (of the basement) to the top (of the attic), from the left (side of the room) to the right (side of the room) and only when this motion is completed does the conception (of the house) seem clear. Along with strong motion in the essays there are also expressions of the writers' self-consciousness - they mention themselves as persons and they often use their own physical movement as a principle of orientation and description. Sometimes they address the reader and invite the reader to "go along" with them to "tour" their houses and gardens: "Let's go downstairs. ---Let's go further down. ---Now we have almost walked through all the house" or "When you enter my house you are on the porch. There you can put on your coat. From the porch you can step into the hall. Directly to your right you will find a staircase; on your left side there is the laundry room" (Nordström 1990, 125).

One way of interpreting the dynamic qualities of the essays by the middle group is to say that these children are expressing a mental transition from a physical or bodily and sensory mode of experiencing the environment to a psychological or symbolic mode of experiencing it. The children of the middle group are between 13 and 15 years old and that age might be considered late for this achievement. One has to

remember, though, that their task is not solely a cognitive one but one related to their emotional world. The title of the essays which they have been asked to write clearly addresses their feelings: "This is how I would like to live". It deals with self involvement in an environmental matter. This task therefore is more complicated than a purely cognitive task like for instance "Describe the house you live in", which does not necessarily involve the writer as much emotionally.

### **Emotional development: "need stimuli" and "object stimuli"**

The subject of the essay demands of the writer that he handles his emotional wishes and integrates them with his knowledge of environmental matters. What we interpret as different developmental stages in this context pertains not only to cognitive development but emotional development as well. One interpretation of the emotional development as it manifests itself in these essays has been made with reference to how children understand their own wishes and their consciousness of having wishes of their own. According to Nilsson (1983) the young child is not conscious of his wishes, termed "need-stimuli" by Nilsson, but he is conscious of their being fulfilled or not, always through someone else's handling of his wishes. His attention and understanding is directed towards the environment, experienced by him, in the terms of Nilsson, as "object stimuli". The youngest children, aged 9 to 12, according to this interpretation, look to the environment as if it - just like the persons in it - by itself can satisfy their wishes. That is, they project their wishes to the environment and see the fulfillment of their wishes as part of the environment proper. The children in the middle group, 13 to 15 years old, start to realize the importance of their self involvement in describing and understanding their environment and elaborate on the difficult task of establishing a psychological separation between their inner and outer worlds, of handling themselves their "need stimuli", to put it in Nilsson's terminology. The dynamic quality of the essays by the children in the middle group - as expressed in the movements in and the length of the essays - might have to do with their effort to establish this psychological separation, something which the older writers, of 16 to 17, have achieved. The hesitant mood, characteristic of some of the essays by the oldest writers, might be due to the fact that they realize - emotionally - that wishfulfillment is now dependent on themselves and that in order to achieve things just wishing won't do. In the process of establishing the psychological separation between inner and outer world, which the children in the middle group are engaged in, the outer world is still strongly emotionally loaded, in that it preserves for these children the capacity of satisfying their "need stimuli".

### **The dynamics of environmental memories**

My thesis is that when acting creatively we put ourselves in the situation of restructuring the psychological connectedness between ourselves and our surrounding in a way that resembles the process in which we once were involved as children. The reevaluation of this connectedness - which is also a separation - gives us emotional powers *from* as well as special interests *in* the physical surrounding. Environmental memories are especially strong from this phase of our psychological

development as they "remind" us emotionally of our investment in the physical environment, when "need stimuli" and "object stimuli" were not yet "definitely" separated.

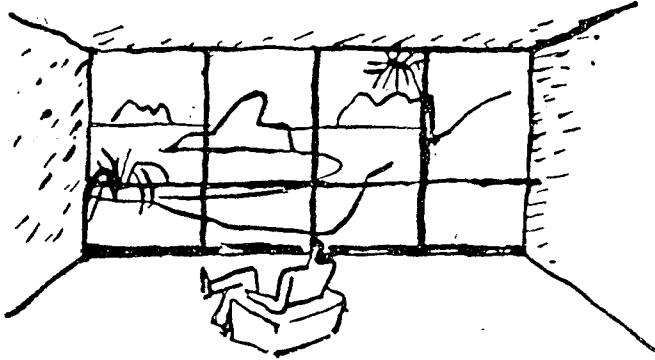


fig. 1 : Architecture as a means of relating the individual to the environment and at the same time differentiating him from it - in this drawing by Le Corbusier, "La Maison des Hommes", 1942.

### **When environmental memories remain memories "only"**

What importance does this kind of deep emotional relatedness have under "ordinary" living conditions? Are they at all important to people? If so, in what way? How do people function without them? These difficult and interesting questions need an investigation of their own. I cannot, however, refrain from reflecting on what people told me about their experiences in an interview study with people who just had moved to a new housing area. The aim of that study was to find out which aspects of the layout of the area had been successful, which unsuccessful. It seemed from the study that most decisive for the inhabitants to order their everyday life in a satisfactory way was their own capability - or lack of capability - to relate themselves emotionally to their new housing situation. Practical and functional housing matters turned out to be second to this psychological one (Nordström, 1987).

One woman in her late 50's missed being able to walk in the forest, to go skiing, to hear the birds in spring time and to notice them go in autumn and to see the leaves turn yellow. "All these things just pass me by here", she lamented. She described how during every day for a fortnight or longer she kept thinking back to her native environment in the middle of Sweden when relatives and friends living there visited her or when she herself had been back in her old environment. This woman acknowledged her difficulties by repeatedly saying during the interview "one should not move" and "when one gets old one thinks differently than when one is young".

Another person, a family man in his 30's had first moved abroad and then later to the same city as the older woman. Because he wanted to get away and needed a job he had left his childhood environment. Now he misses it and states that he would not mind living a bit more "primitively" than he does at present, indicating that a

materially high standard is not all there is to life. During every long week-end he travels the 200 kilometres back to his childhood environment. "I do relax there", he says. "Here I can't relax. It is flat, nowhere to walk". Both these people seem to have "ended up" where they are today, "hit" by the circumstances.

Some people - though materially well off - seem, like these two people, to have an intense experience of missing something fundamental in the present environment. Their environmental connections are to environments far away. The recollection of these environments works as we have seen in two ways - the memories themselves make the individual happy when thinking of them, giving emotional reassurance of belonging somewhere; the recollection also makes them go on visits back home. One way in which the recollection does *not* work is to help them create a relatedness to their present environment. These people cannot find any physical similarities between their present places of living and the places where they have lived as young people and they do not see themselves as having any means of creating any connections.

In contrast to these dissatisfied persons a middleaged woman living in the same housing area as these persons demonstrates a different attitude to her housing situation. She and her family were not only interested in but also knowledgeable about houses and gardens and they had had a week end house in the countryside. They wanted to buy a house close to the city - rather than in the city itself - so that they could live in a house of their own all year round. Most of all they wanted to buy an old farm. Not having the economic means to do that something cheaper would have to do. The cheapest way was for them to buy a newly-built house. From the start she and her family wanted to re-do the house transforming it into something they liked. The greatest merit of the house, as they saw it, was that it would be easy to change. The moment they realized this they also realized they would be able to feel at home there. The house was transformed by them, shaped into something personal. That they had made this environment their own was evident when they stated with satisfaction: "You really feel free out here. You can walk around dressed as you like. We all wear old clothes when we are out in the garden working. We dress any which way, and look awful."

The difference in attitudes between this woman and the two previously mentioned persons is that this woman could establish a relationship to her house and environment, though both the houses and the environment "objectively" seen were rather anonymous. This woman and her family were very practical, a talent that allowed them to psychologically involve themselves in creating a new environment. Their sense of freedom seems to stem directly from this involvement. The others could not involve themselves psychologically and felt restricted in an impersonal housing situation.

## Theoretical and practical implications

The theoretical implication of the above arguments is that environmental and housing satisfaction as seen from this particular psychological perspective implies the engagement of the individual's emotions in a deeply personal way going back to early experiences when the individual as a child experienced excitement and emotional arousal in his relatedness to as well as separatedness from the environment. It is this bond between the individual and the environment which we as researchers should try to trace in its varying appearances and transformations. Our interest as researchers in environmental psychology should therefore be directed towards studying the *processes* in which the experiences of relatedness to as well as differentiation from the environment come about and is transformed. To understand these processes we need theories within psychology - which offer us the capacity to theorize not only about cognitive and perceptual development but also about emotional development. A practical implication is that physical environments should be so designed as to elaborate on the important relatedness between indoor and outdoor and they should have an individuality for the inhabitants to attach themselves to. Architecturally and aesthetically this can be expressed in a variety of ways, strengthening the individuality of the place for the inhabitants. That would facilitate the process of interpretation in the individual and make her experience, again, that exciting, never-settled bond between herself and the environment, which she already experienced as a child.

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