

**Place attachment and negative places: A qualitative approach to historic former mental asylums, stigma and place-protectionism.**

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## **Place attachment and negative places: A qualitative approach to historic former mental asylums, stigma and place-protectionism.**

**Abstract:** Research exploring place attachment, place identity and people-place relations often adopts a quantitative approach and focuses on positively perceived places with negative or ambivalent places being largely omitted. This study investigated patterns of attachment of former staff members from three conventionally stigmatised places: historic mental asylums in the north of England. Semi-structured, qualitative interviews were conducted with 16 former staff from the three sites that were in the process of being redeveloped into residential use. Firstly, the study demonstrated that strong, positive attachments were present for the former staff members, created through length of time spent working within these institutions and the sense of belonging and community experienced. Secondly, these attachments were linked to strong senses of individual identity born of the personal and career developments that these sites had offered. Thirdly, the findings expand on the literature exploring both place-protective action and negatively perceived places and demonstrate the value of employing qualitative methods in investigating these. Furthermore, the article demonstrates that strong positive place attachments can support place change as a way of preserving and retaining a place. This challenges the existing assumptions within literature concerning place-protective action, that assumes this occurs primarily in opposition to place change.

**Keywords:** place attachment; stigma; asylums; qualitative interviews; redevelopment

### **1. Introduction**

Urban development is not simply about money, bricks and mortar. It is also affected by the ebb and flow of emotions, of which place attachment is a part. Existing research on place attachment focuses on positively perceived places and has not examined the role of place attachments or its effect on the redevelop-ability of places. This study investigated the level of place attachment that might be found in relation to an often negatively perceived place, former mental asylums, and how it consequently affected urban change. It sought to ascertain what makes former asylums difficult to develop; is it because people have an aversion to stigmatised sites like asylums? Does place attachment happen to negatively perceived sites or is it only a feature of positively perceived sites? Does strong place attachment increase the likelihood of place-protective action (Devine-Wright, 2014; 2009) and is this possible for negatively perceived sites? Limited literature exists that explores whether the stigma associated with the former use of asylums has been overcome or passed to the successor use (Kearns et al. 2010). It has been suggested that the tainted reputations of former asylums affects the interpretation and remembrance of these sites (Moons et al. 2015) and that reuse demands “not only a change of narrative or rebranding, but a very particular negotiation with their architectural form” (Pendlebury et al. 2019, p. 212). Conventional interpretations on place attachment and place-protective action are challenged in this study because it found that people do attach to negatively perceived places. Equally, strong attachment does not automatically lead to place-protective action such as campaigning against redevelopment, rather strong attachment can in fact be supportive of place change.

People make places and places make people. What makes places meaningful is the relationship between the self, others and the environment (Gustafson, 2014). Over time places and buildings change and so do the meanings that people attribute to those places. Places can also be seen as being positive or negative by different people at different times within their lifespan and are repositories of memories, feelings, values and emotions (Devine-Wright & Lyons, 1997). This article investigates the often negatively perceived place of historic former asylums and explores the role of place attachment within the redevelopment process. Reactions to positively experienced places, changes to these places and displacement from places has been examined (Devine-Wright & Howes, 2010; Milligan, 2003; Manzo, 2005) however, what is lacking in the literature is the question of

negative or ambivalent places (Manzo, 2014; Hernández et al. 2014). What constitutes a "negative" place is difficult to define. Meskell (2002) argues that places become repositories of negative memories or events in the collective imagination. Prisons, asylums, battlefields and slave houses have been seen as such places (Lagenbach, 1992) as these are sites that are perceived as having had negative events within their histories. Venables et al (2012) suggest that people's response to locally stigmatised sites may result in reinterpreting them in a positive light in order to create a strong sense of social cohesion and pride. Alternatively, shame has been seen as a powerful motive to obliterate a place, to remove all traces of it (Foote, 2003). Foote (2003) also argues that in seeking to obliterate the traces of stigma, this is never truly achievable and that connotations can stain a place for a considerable period of time. He contends that such sites are in a "limbo of conflicting emotions" (2003, p. 207); that places of shame "disrupt ordinary bonds of attachment and make it difficult to form new ones" (2003, p. 207). Examining the reuse of historic former asylums therefore begins to address the gap in literature on place attachment and negatively perceived sites, to explore how people (re)interpret them and to continue to ask whether the traces of the past stigma remain.

The majority of place attachment literature follows what Bailey et al. (2016) describe as the structural approach, using both quantitative and qualitative methods to explore place attachment. The structural approach also predominantly examines the manifestation of place attachment at a specific point in time (Devine-Wright, 2014) and the stages of psychological responses over time to changes in place (Devine-Wright, 2009). The second approach, the process-based approach, investigates the development of people-place bonds over time (Guiliani, 2003). The question of whether place attachment might be found in relation to negatively perceived former asylums and its effect on their redevelopment necessitated an approach that enabled the exploration of people's feelings and emotions towards these places. Therefore, a mainly structural, qualitative approach was taken to permit the examination of these emotions. The use of a qualitative, semi-structured interview method to explore place attachments was deliberate in order to understand how people respond to changes in place through their own views and opinions of both the change and how they finding meaning in these places. In doing so, the study builds on Bailey et al's (2016) assertion of the importance of the qualitative method in researching place attachment and situates itself within the wider tradition of qualitative place attachment research (Dixon & Durrheim, 2004; Scannell & Gifford, 2017; Seamon, 2014; Tuan, 1977).

It should be noted that this article employs the term "asylum" which was a deliberate, albeit potentially contentious, choice. Asylums have been considered stigmatised with particularly negative connotations (Moons et al. 2015; Franklin, 2002; Weiner, 2004) and as the research explored the effect of these connotations on the reuse of these sites, it was felt that the term "asylum" with all the associated meanings, was the appropriate one to use. The term "asylum" here refers to the large hospitals constructed from the Victorian era onwards with the specific purpose of treating mental illnesses; for a detailed history, see Philo (2004).

### 1.1 Historic former asylum sites

Former asylums are considered architecturally and historically significant and therefore worthy of being judged as heritage (Franklin, 2002). They are often stigmatised by "tainted reputations" (Moons et al. 2015) or are perceived as negative places (Meskell, 2002). Historic or architectural interest is a characteristic that contributes to creating attachments to place (Scannell & Gifford, 2010) and many former asylums possess such architectural qualities. Former asylums are therefore psychologically interesting because of these contradictions; they are both beautiful works of architecture and places with negative connotations. How practical decisions are taken about their fate is determined by the perceptions of the people making those decisions. It is valuable to understand the impact that changes and adaptations to negatively perceived places have upon people who are attached to them, and to challenge the assumption that because these places are perceived as being purely negative, nobody cares about what happens to them. They have complicated histories, being seen as both

separate and intertwined with their local communities (Ellis, 2013; Gittins, 1998; Smith, 2006), and as places of care and confinement (Philo, 2004; Scull, 2006).

The negative, stigmatising connotations (Moons et al. 2015; Weiner, 2004; Franklin, 2002) of former asylums have persisted over a long period of time. As a functioning institution, the Victorian asylum had a reputation as a feared place, symbolising the segregation of the mentally ill from normal society (Gittins, 1998; Lowe 1883; Grant-Smith, 1922). Subsequently, the fear of the “madhouse” was seen to have transferred to the buildings themselves (Moons et al. 2015; Mellett, 1982). The majority of these large institutions have now closed and have either been redeveloped into residential use or left empty (Chaplin & Peters, 2003). This reuse has also been made possible due to the time, distance and changes in society that have enabled former asylum sites to be re-evaluated and conceived as “unique works of architecture” (Franklin, 2002, p. 183), suggesting that any stigma connected to the previous use has dissipated. However, this focus on the aesthetic qualities of the sites has affected their interpretation and people's memories of them and their history has been argued as being largely obscured through their redevelopment because of that “taint” or stigma (Moons et al. 2015).

The reuse process of historic former asylums (as opposed to how they are remembered, see Moons et al. 2015; Joseph et al. 2009 for example) has not been considered widely within any academic literature or discipline, and there are no studies that examine place attachment and former asylum buildings. This article responds to gaps in both these areas of research. In examining people's attachments to former asylums, it starts to explore our understanding of how people respond to changes in places that are perceived as negative. Importantly, it has applied and significant implications for real estate decisions. An understanding of the emotions involved in the real estate process, not just the processes themselves, can aid different stakeholders in approaching practical decisions. Before outlining this study's findings, existing studies will be explored in order to investigate whether (and if so, why and how) place-protective action is fuelled by place attachment or stigma.

## 1.2 Place attachment and place-protective action

Place attachment is an emotional bond to a place that is somehow meaningful for that person (Altman & Low, 1992). The aesthetics and historic nature of places is an influencing factor on place attachment (Scannell & Gifford, 2010) as they influence collective memory and a collective sense of belonging and continuity (Scannell & Gifford, 2010; Low, 1992; Lewicka, 2008). The historic and architectural elements of former asylums could therefore generate strong attachments. However, existing literature argues that place itself may not be sufficient enough to generate attachment (Shamai & Illatov, 2005). The existence of people within these places is important; place attachment and people are linked together through their families, partners, children and other social groups who inhabit these places (Altman & Low, 1992); it is as much the association with other people as with the place itself that creates attachment. Places are entwined with an individual's sense of self and self-continuity (e.g. Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). The staff spent their days with a limited number of people across long periods of time, often the majority of their careers, within these institutions. Continuity across time is seen as a key element in the construction and maintenance of self-identity (Jaspal, 2014), as is belonging (Vignoles et al. 2002 cited by Jaspal, 2014). Place attachments are formed through a long experience of, or involvement in, a place (Shamai & Illatov, 2005), combined with a sense of belonging within a community (Guiliani, 2003). Consequently, the longer someone has lived in a place, the more they feel they belong there, to that community, and, as a result, to that place.

Attachment to place, either collectively or individually, developed through length of residence and a sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Inahan & Finch, 2004), has been seen as a catalyst for action to protect or save a place when threatened (Devine-Wright, 2009; Mihaylov & Perkins, 2014). Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) and Jaspal and Breakwell (2014) argued that there are four principles which guide action: continuity, self-esteem, self-efficacy and distinctiveness. Continuity implies that a place must remain constant for people and when a place is threatened this either

creates coping strategies (Jaspal & Breakwell, 2014), or negative responses to that change (Stedman, 2002; Devine-Wright & Howes, 2010). Devine-Wright and Howes (2010) suggest that when place identity and strong emotional attachments to a particular place are threatened, this leads to negative, oppositional attitudes and oppositional behaviour. Continuity in place is connected to a person's identity, self-esteem and self-efficacy and are therefore linked to place-protective action caused by place disruption. Place disruption has been seen as a rupture in attachment to place or as something that threatens someone's place identity (Bonaiuto et al. 1996; Brown & Perkins, 1992; Devine-Wright, 2009) through the negative impact disruption to a place can have (Bailey et al. 2016; Fried, 2000; Inhanan & Finch, 2004, Brown & Perkins, 1992). Those with strong attachment to place are more likely to experience place disruption in the face of change (Bailey et al. 2016). According to existing literature, the redevelopment and changes to these sites should cause painful place disruption and lead the former staff members to engage in place-protective action (Devine-Wright, 2014; 2009).

### 1.3 Place stigma and negatively perceived places

There is considerably less literature that investigates place stigma and the definition of "stigma" itself is challenging (Gourley, 2015; Link & Phelan, 2001). Gourley (2015, p. 2) suggested that a stigma is "a subjective distaste" whereas Link and Phelan (2001) have contended that there is a huge variability in the definitions within the literature and stigma is often defined as "a mark of disgrace" or some related aspect like stereotyping or rejection (2001:364). Major and Eccleston (2005, p. 63) in their conceptualisation of stigma argue that "exclusion is an essential part of stigmatisation" and it is always negative. Often, Goffman's (1968) definition of stigma as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting" is used (Link & Phelan, 2001) and it is this definition to which Wacquant (2008; 2007) added the concept of a "blemish of place". Places are said to be stigmatised or to suffer from blemishes connected with existing (non-place related) stigmas (Wacquant, 2007) however Goffman (1968) also suggested that stigma was a temporal phenomenon and that once a label denoting a stigma was applied, it was difficult to remove. This longevity in a stigma persisting results from that stigma becoming a myth or urban legend which continues to be written and rewritten in the history of a site until it becomes part of the identity of that place.

In the built environment context, the word "stigma" is used to denote a physical site contamination (for example Bell, 2008) that needs rectifying before redevelopment can occur. Stigma has also been seen to attach to a building from negative events such as "murder houses" (Bell, 2008; Herman; 2018; Thorsby, 2016) and from cultural associations such as disadvantaged housing estates (Hastings, 2004; Dean & Hastings, 2000). There is no existing built environment literature that examines the process of removing symbolic stigma contamination, the existing literature explores the cost of removal or the effect on value (Bell, 2008; Roddewig, 1996). Both Bell (2008) and Roddewig (1996) write from an American perspective where valuations and appraisals have different rules and regulations to those in the United Kingdom where the guidance from the professional body, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, focuses on environmental factors that can affect value (RICS, 2010; 2018), but makes no mention of non-physical stigma. Equally, in United States law it is a requirement when selling a residential property to declare whether there is a stigma attached to that property (this is not the case in United Kingdom law) and under that law, a stigmatised property is defined as "property psychologically impacted by an event which occurred or was suspected to have occurred on the property, such even being one that has no physical impact of any kind" (Morgan, 1994 in Chapman & Ludlum, 2014) thereby considering more than the physical aspect of a stigma.

The limited literature that does examine non-physical place stigma comes from disciplines outside the built environment. The majority explores the stigma associated with social housing estates (Manzo, 2014; Hastings & Dean, 2003; Kirkness & Tjijè-Dre, 2017, Wacquant, 2008, 2007; Wassenberg, 2004), the stigma of place reputation (Hayden, 2000) and murder houses (Sneikers & Reijnders, 2011). Places are stigmatised or suffer from blemishes connected to stigmas such as poverty, and

this territorial stigma leads to individuals being discredited from certain areas of life (Kirkness & Tijè-Dra, 2017; Wacquant, 2008). The focus of existing literature is on modern or recent stigmas such as housing estates and housing renewal areas (e.g. Crooks, 2017; Kirkness & Tijè-Dra, 2017; Manzo, 2014), and not on places with long enduring historical stigmas. Within this literature, there is evidence to suggest that people feel attachment to places that are stigmatised (Kirkness & Tijè-Dra, 2017). Considering the existing focus on modern stigma, historic former asylum sites therefore provide an excellent place typology to explore negatively perceived places resulting from historic stigmas, attachment and reactions to changes in that place through their redevelopment.

Given the lack of clear insight arising from existing literature, this article seeks to answer the following research questions, and is equally motivated to do so, because these issues have a significant effect on the reuse of sites:

1. Do former staff members feel attached to former asylum sites and how does this improve our understanding of place attachment and negatively perceived places?
2. Does place attachment play a role in the redevelopment process for historic former asylum sites?
3. How might a consideration of a particular type of negatively perceived place (former asylums) improve our understanding of the ways people respond to a change in that place?

## **2. Methods and analysis of data**

### **2.1 Methods**

The use of a semi-structured approach should be justifiable (Denscombe, 1998). This approach enabled cross interview comparison and the investigation of how former staff members perceived, attributed, and constructed meanings, opinions and emotions in respect of the redevelopment of the historic former asylums in which they had worked. The majority of place attachment literature has employed a quantitative research methodology whereas the wider tradition of research on place often takes a qualitative approach. As Bailey et al. (2016) have argued using a qualitative approach is important in exploring the phenomenon of place attachment. Sebastien (2020, p. 208) has suggested that “by examining people’s connection to places as expressed through their own words, the subjective, lived experiences people have with nature and their territory can be captured”. Qualitative research is a methodology that is employed to examine and understand meanings that individuals have towards a particular situation or problem (Creswell, 2009) and the semi-structured approach adopted allowed how meanings are made, presented, recalled through dialogue and speech to be investigated. The meanings were only knowable through how people constructed their version of the building through language and dialogue.

Interview participants in this article worked in three former asylum sites which were all in the stages of being redeveloped at the time of data collection. The moment of redevelopment (when the site moves from one use to another through the planning process) was chosen as a focus as it is at this moment that different stakeholders (developers, planners, heritage bodies, owners, former staff members and the general public) involved in this process, both from a place’s past and future, meet and where old and new meanings of place begin to appear and are renegotiated. It is also the point at which a site passes from an existing or previous use to a new use and therefore when attachments may result in places being perceived as being threatened and where place-protective action (Devine-Wright, 2014; 2009) is likely to occur. The interviews were all face to face and were audio recorded before being transcribed. An information sheet was provided prior to the interview, along with a consent form which was signed and discussed before the interview commenced. Whilst there was an initial list of questions to be addressed, there was flexibility to cover topics outside these questions which enabled the interviewee to talk about their views and opinions more openly using their own words (Kvale, 2007), and to recount their first memories of the sites through to their views on their current state and redevelopment. Interviewees were asked how they remembered the building and the site, what the

atmosphere was like and whether their feelings changed across time. The participants were also asked about how they felt the local community saw the site and whether they thought those perceptions had changed over time. Questions were also posed about the redevelopment and whether this was affected by the place's past. Finally, the participants were asked whether they felt attached to the site and if so, how. The quotes utilised in this article portray each interviewee's own words in order to accurately recount their lived experience of working and living in and beside these sites (Seamon, 2014).

The interviews enabled these issues to be addressed in a manner sensitive to the participant's situation whilst taking account of the broader social and cultural issues arising from this specific type of building, such as examining the question of stigma in respect of these institutions that closed approximately twenty years ago. A purposive (Silverman, 2000) sampling method was used where participants were chosen to participate because they were connected to the former asylum being redeveloped. This article focuses on former staff in particular because this group of people experienced the site as a functioning hospital, lived through their closure and, in many cases, still lived close to their respective sites thereby also constituting an element of the local surrounding community. Locating former asylum staff was a challenging process and several strategies of recruitment were attempted. The most successful was posting adverts on social media websites for the former asylum sites together with a snowball effect (where participants help to select or nominate other people to approach, (Bryman, 2008) from initial participants. Former staff members were therefore chosen either because they contacted the researcher from the adverts posted and were willing to take part or because they suggested someone else who would be interested who the researcher then contacted to ascertain whether this was the case. In total 16 former staff were interviewed across the three sites. In this article the former staff members have been given pseudonyms for anonymity.

## 2.2 Analysis of data

The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and then a combination of grounded theory and thematic analysis was conducted both using NVivo software and manually by the researcher. Both theories seek to identify themes from within the data (Charmaz, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2006); grounded theory was used to identify themes and codes from the data rather than from the research questions or pre-existing theories (Charmaz, 2006; Ezzy, 2002) and thematic analysis was used to enable both the experiences and meanings for participants to be examined (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis and grounded theory share the same first coding process, that of open (Ezzy, 2002) or "first cycle" (Saldana, 2013) coding. The pattern adopted followed Boyatzis' (1998) approach to thematic analysis by identifying recurring themes within the interviews that took both the research aims and themes arising. Codes were arranged into themes and subthemes before being turned into concepts (Saldana, 2013). Qualitative data collection and analysis is "firmly in the researcher's hands" (Ingham & Atkinson, 2013, p. 243) and so the quotes are presented as transcribed to allow their voices to be represented in their own words; as well as to enable other studies to investigate the same phenomenon in different locations in the future and to aid the validity and reliability of the study.

Validity is a term that applies to conducting research that is of a high standard (Johnson & Turner, 2003). Maxwell (2012) however has argued that researchers are concerned with providing a valid description of the event under investigation, as well as what these events meant for the people involved in them. He (2012) suggests that the challenge is assessing how we make valid judgements about phenomenon which are experienced subjectively to which Hamersley (1995) asserts that we are not able to be sure about the validity of any claim, we can only judge those claims or their credibility. It must also be noted that the interviews took place approximately 20 years following the closure of these institutions and therefore staff opinions and memories may have changed to reflect society's view of these places today. Therefore, assessing credibility is complicated. This study offers

the opinions of the former staff members as detailing their individual experience, seeking to remove potential bias from the researcher. However, the researcher inevitably influences the research (Banfield, 2004; Denzin, 2009). Hunter and Brewer's (2003) definition of validity was therefore used as to whether the research measures what it purports to measure. Whilst it was not possible to identify whether or not each interviewee spoke the truth, this study examined people's opinions and experiences, something which is always subjective.

### 3. Analysis

#### 3.1 Sense of community, social bonds and career development

The findings in this study demonstrate that strong, positive attachments were present for all the former staff members. These attachments were created through an interlinked combination of social bonds, longevity of career (and associated personal development) and a sense of community with fellow staff members and patients (Altman & Low, 1992; Lewicka, 2011; Riley, 1992). All 16 interviewees said they felt attached primarily to the sites, but also to the people within them and the memories they had from their time working there. Spending the majority of their working lives on one site, their job roles within former asylums gave them opportunities for both personal and career development and this was highlighted as an important factor in how they felt about these institutions:

*The training, it gave me confidence, the people actually liked me, I started to do really well, people said I was really good at stuff and I had these new friends that came from other places in the country and they actually thought I was ok so it had that impact. [...] my self-esteem started to come up [...]. And it just started a whole upward ladder movement for me and it hasn't stopped since actually (Julia).*

As staff became more confident in their roles, established friendships and social connections developed, this increased:

*It's memories, I know I've got friends who lived in the staff houses as well, so there's that, it's.... I suppose for me it was my whole career, that's where my nursing started (Maria).*

These sites were not merely a place of work that you could leave at the end of the day for many of the former staff members. The social connections and development opportunities enabled staff to have, and achieve, aspirations that might not have previously been possible. Whole careers and lives were experienced within the sites and these experiences created strong personal and collective identities, memories, social bonds and opportunities for staff members which in turn created and deepened their attachments to the sites.

*It was great. The atmosphere was really good because it was its own community. Because the...[sic] if you worked there, there was a lot of people lived there. [...] So a lot of people lived there so it was its own community, it had its own church, it had its own social club which had its own sort of committee and some of the farmers from the outside community you know sort of joined in as well (Edith).*

*Definitely. A massive community. It was unreal. You had a small village. You had hairdressers, you had a club, a social club, outings, everybody knew everybody by their first name, including the patients. It was a fantastic atmosphere. Great sense of community (Linda).*

The sense of community was highlighted as a positive thing, creating a "camaraderie" and a "sense of belonging". In some cases, this sense of belonging and attachment was so strong that former staff members were unable to leave: "I had bad interviews for good jobs because I couldn't move away from here" (George). However, the image of these former asylum sites was not always positive:



*But when you work in mental health, it's not something that you can... and of course with regard to confidentiality, you can't discuss things out of work. I mean you can often say things without naming things, oh this strange event happened, blah blah blah but I suppose in that respect it was very insular and if you worked at the [name of hospital], you weren't a breed apart but you certainly weren't... a builder or a... different. Very different (Tom).*

The distance in time and changes in societal attitudes could be said to be at work here as staff have had the opportunity to reflect on practices that they saw during their time within these institutions. Tom also hints at the reputation of these places as stigmatised as the work they carried out within the walls of the institution was not something that could be openly discussed. These institutions have been seen as being separate from local communities (Gittins, 1998) however this has been challenged (for example, Ellis, 2013) and Julia described how they were in fact part of that local community through the employment opportunities it provided:

*When it was alive, people were alive with it, and so then it went into decline and I actually think a great sadness fell over the town because there were so many people employed there (Julia).*

The asylum was seen as a living entity by Julia, not just a physical building, and one that produced shared emotions and feelings from those both inside (staff members) and those outside (but who had connections to it). Social bonds are important in the formation of attachments (Lewicka, 2011; Riley, 1992) and the fortunes of the asylum were experienced collectively by the local area.

Whilst most of the staff stated they were attached to their respective sites, one former staff member contradicted this view and when asked if they felt attached to the buildings, responded:

*No. I only feel attachment to... it was a place I worked and lived and it was a happy time in my life but the happy time was with my family and with the people that I worked with. Not the building. [...] I'm the same about any building. I know this is my home, but buildings are buildings and it's only people that matter so I haven't got any emotional er... involvement in the bricks and mortar (Mary).*

Again, the role of social experience in creating attachments can be seen in the above quote. Lewicka's (2011, p. 221) assertion that "physical places acquire meaning through personal and group memories" is demonstrated here. People say that they are attached to the place, however it is the social bonds and memories created in these places which is likely to be the foundation for that attachment. As in Wood et al's (2015) study, many of the former staff members interviewed in this research kept "souvenirs" of their time there; from maps and signs to the keys they used. The building, or rather the memories and attachments created there, were so significant that they needed to retain a marker to remind themselves (Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988) and to retain a connection to it once closed.

In Manzo's (2005, p. 75) study respondents "talked explicitly about how a particular place "made them who they were" and how their understanding of themselves changed through their relationship with that place". This was seen through the social connections, aspirations and lifecycle experiences for the staff as they expressed confidence, development of self-esteem and careers; their relationship to the site was connected to their self-development opportunities both personal and professional (Manzo, 2005; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1995; Hay, 1998; Gustafson 2014). Being unable to discuss their work with people outside the institutions equally strengthened the bond with those who worked within them as they understood the role. What is also significant is that this study has demonstrated that attachment was expressed towards a building type that has been seen as negative (Franklin, 2002; Moons *et al.* 2015; Weiner, 2004). Few studies have explored the types of places where attachments form (Manzo, 2014). People are able to form attachments to buildings, even when they

are not seen as positive by all. Equally, those attachments can be positive, despite being towards a negatively perceived site.

### 3.2 Place attachment supporting redevelopment

Existing place attachment literature argues that the more attached someone is to a place, the more likely they are to act when that place is threatened or changed in some way (Devine-Wright, 2014; 2009). Given the strength of attachment exhibited by former staff members, it would have therefore been expected that some action or reaction to the development of the three sites would have been likely. However, this was not the case in any of the three sites examined by this research. None of the former staff members interviewed in this study took either individual or collective action to prevent the redevelopments. In fact, they felt that the buildings' time as psychiatric hospitals was seen as being over:

*Something had to happen, it couldn't stay as a derelict site forever (Richard).*

*I think it's nice that it's going to be used (Edith).*

*I'm happy that it was used (Hannah).*

*I mean I think it should be used, I think it's... I think there's a dichotomy, I think it clearly is... it belongs to the past in terms of its old use, it belongs to the past and it needs to be brought into the future [...] I think it needs to be redeveloped, I think there needs to be sympathy in how it's redeveloped so it needs to be brought into the modern world, it needs to be updated (Michael).*

All of those interviewed spoke about the reuse in a positive way even if they did not like specific details about the developments. One staff member commented:

*I think it's us older generation who have the attachment to it that felt that it should be redeveloped and the history documented in some way (Michael).*

The history of staff members themselves was tied in with the history of the site and the redevelopment was viewed as a way of preserving that history. It also demonstrates potentially a pragmatism that is not usually seen with heritage redevelopments and suggests that while there was no overt place-protective action, people wanted the sites to be remembered through their reuse. A possible reason for this was provided by one of the interviewees:

*I think that it's perhaps needed that time of being, not quite derelict but unused and sort of separated off. And now it can start, those bonds have weakened and I think they would have been more, not concern, I don't know people would have expressed concern, but the emotions attached to that development would have been greater (Michael).*

Whilst it is possible that time has weakened rather than strengthened attachments, this article has shown that former staff members were deeply attached to their respective sites. The staff preferred to see something happening with their sites, rather than see them fall into decay. Place-protective action appears to a spectrum rather than a constant. There is a pragmatic part of this spectrum where change is accepted which incorporates an emotional affinity to adaptive reuse because it offers the possibility of viable protection through that reuse where otherwise a site or building would be lost completely. Participants' attachments to the sites resulted in them being supportive of the redevelopments.

It is also possible that the type of building and associated connotations could be a further reason for the lack of place-protective action (Devine-Wright, 2009; 2014) or equally it could be attributed to the closure of the asylums. Lynch (1972, p. 132) has argued that "people who must cope with the shock

of a major historical transition feel the disconnection of the present from past or future". Closure of former asylums was traumatic for staff (Rossun et al. 1994) but the closure for the three sites in this article was twenty years ago; enough time had passed to enable the redevelopment to occur with no protests or desire to protect the buildings. Stromberg's (2012) assertion that the reuse of places with challenging histories is the result of enough time passing corresponds to both Franklin (2002), who argued that enough time had passed for former asylums to be valued for their architecture, and Virilio (1994) who contended that it is a question of time and how much time must pass before we can consider sites anew. Difficult, challenging or stigmatised places require a particular amount of time to pass before they become part of the "remote past" and therefore cannot hurt us in the present (Lynch, 197, p. 42).

There is a further interpretation that could be made. Place-protective action (Devine-Wright, 2014; 2009) has been considered in terms of protests against a change, and yet protecting a place, in this case former asylums, could involve accepting change that retains a building rather than see it fall down or be demolished. Maintaining, retaining and adapting a building into a new use could be seen as being a place-protective action in itself. The physical traces of the place remain, providing a link of continuity to the memories and social bonds created there. The redevelopment of the sites was seen as a good thing, not because interviewees were attached to the place itself necessarily, but because their attachments created a desire or need to see a life beyond the asylum and for the asylum. Their attachment, or place-protective action, was expressed in this case through their support of the redevelopments as a way of breathing new life into the sites, rather than through protests to protect or save the building. This is a highly significant finding as it challenges existing literature in demonstrating that place attachment can be supportive of place change rather than proving a barrier to it.

#### **4. Conclusion**

To conclude, this study sought to extend our understanding of how people respond to changes in place through exploring a negatively perceived place (former asylums). This article explored the level of place attachment that might be found in relation to a negatively perceived place and how it might affect the urban change process. A key research question was whether it is possible to form strong attachments to these sites and do any attachments create place-protective action when change is proposed? The findings demonstrate that people do attach to negatively perceived places and that whilst these attachments do not lead to overt place-protective actions such as campaigning against the redevelopments, the attachments lead to place-protective action in the form of support for the redevelopments as a way to breathe new life into the sites. The findings in this study contribute to the existing literature in five ways: by expanding on Bailey et al's (2016) assertion that the qualitative interview is a valuable method for researching place attachment; by revealing the possibility and strength of attachment felt towards a negatively perceived place; by extending our understanding of how people react to a change or threat to a place when that place is negatively perceived; by indicating the necessity to respond to, and advancing Hernandez et al's (2014) call to examine the types of places that create place attachment and by addressing Manzo's (2005) critique that most existing place attachment literature focuses on positive, or at best ambiguous, places when researching place attachment.

Further studies should employ a qualitative method, as well as exploring a longitudinal approach to capture the potential change in views over time towards a negatively perceived building type. Subsequent research could thus expand upon and confirm these findings to further inform theoretical understanding of people-place relations (Bailey et al. 2016) and place protective action (Devine-Wright, 2014; 2009) in respect of negatively perceived places. The findings also demonstrate additional avenues for research. The sites of investigation, former asylums, enabled a view across three forms of the same typology and this could be further expanded across other former asylum sites to see whether the same results are identified. Equally, the research only focussed on one building

type with historic negative connotations, future studies could identify other, similar types of place to examine another context where the proposed change or redevelopment might be less favourably regarded. Future research could also investigate the point in time when redevelopment occurs, this research took place nearly 20 years after the former asylums closed and therefore a significant amount of time has passed since the closure; would the results be the same if the closure had just happened? Future research could thus expand upon and confirm these findings to further inform theoretical understanding of people-place relations (Bailey et al. 2016) and place protective action (Devine-Wright, 2014; 2009) in respect of negatively perceived places.

This study showed that place-protective action can take place in the form of support for place change and that this occurs for negatively perceived places. This acceptance of change and adaptive reuse is a preservation tool in itself. This is where this research offers something new and divergent from existing literature which has focused on overt place-protective actions such as campaigns and protests against change and demonstrates that attachments can create a desire to see something new happen to a particular place and this finding would benefit from additional research. It is also hoped that this work can assist in bringing together stakeholders involved in redevelopment such as planners, developers, real estate and heritage professionals who, whilst they come into contact with each other during the redevelopment process, often do not collaborate well together (Gibbeson 2018).

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